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Editor's Notebook

ARTICLES

Despair Abounding: The Recent Films of Robert Bresson — MICHAEL DEMPSEY 2

Truffaut's Sanctuary: *The Green Room* — MICHAEL KLEIN 15

The Films of Marta Meszaros, or, The Importance of Being Banal — BARBARA HALPERN MARTINEAU 21

Carolee Schneemann's *Autobiographical Trilogy* — SCOTT MACDONALD 27

New Directions in Indian Cinema — CHIDANANDA DAS GUPTA 32

REVIEWS

The Space Movie — BEVERLE HOUSTON 42

Angi Vera — LEONARD AND BARBARA QUART 45

Allegro Barbaro — WILLIAM KELLY 47

Hungarian Rhapsody — KAREN JAEHNE 53

Just Like at Home — JEFF HERMAN 56

The Sudden Wealth of the Poor People of Kombach — PETER HARCOURT 60

COVER: Veronika Papp as the heroine in *Angi Vera*, by Pal Gabor. (See review, p. 45.)

DOCUMENTARY

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PERIODICALS

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Cont. on page 20

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sent different values: a man who was honest and an example to his community, a man who was shy and appreciated by his friends for his gentleness, two lovers who were inseparable and exemplary in their devotion . . . Many of the images (photographs in the chapel[3]) are finally so private, so introverted, that we can not easily grasp their significance. They exist for Julien and for Truffaut. Some however are more public: an image of Jules (Oscar Werner in *Jules and Jim*) emerges as a touchstone of value; iconic representations of Herny James, Henri Bergson and, I believe, Wilde and Cocteau, stare at us through the flames and gates of the altar.[4] The signs are somewhat privatistic. But they are signs—signs that we are invited to appropriate as our own. Truffaut's dead also include Adèle Hugo (her journal, written in a private code, is the source of *The Story of Adèle H.*), Jean Itard (his memoirs are the source of *The Wild Child*), Jules, Jim, Catherine, Anne, Muriel, Claude—and Antoine Doinel (Truffaut's childhood and past).[5] The film invites us to add our own dead to the list.

The dead are Julien's family, an extended somewhat unconventional but very modern family, a personal and cultural community that is a source of comfort, continuity and coherence. In Truffaut's work, while human relationships certainly are important and are the main focus of the narratives, a shared sense of participating in a cultural tradition is often the cement that holds together fragile human contacts (in *Fahrenheit 451* Montag, Clarisse and the book people devote their lives to memorizing and thus preserving key *textes*, in *Day For Night* Truffaut and the film-making group gather to participate in a common creative endeavor, in *The Green Room* Julien and Cecilia attend their dead). In moments of deeply felt isolation and loneliness Truffaut's characters often reach out on their own for a kind of cultural communion (in *The 400 Blows* Antoine creates an altar for Balzac, in *Two English Girls* Claude sees Rodin's sculptures as a touchstone of a passing age). The many allusions to film, art and literature in Truffaut's works, far from being indulgent, extrinsic or elitist, are kindred attempts to commemorate and thus link with traditions and values which have become subcultural and privatistic and in so doing reflect a larger crisis, one that hovers on the margins of the film.

In *The Green Room* the candles and photographs are a light show, a metaphor for film and art in general. At one point Julien has a dream in which the candles converge in patterns, counterpointed to the sound of the artillery of war. It is a fitful dream, something of a nightmare, but also an affirmation of life, art and humanist traditions against flux and decadence. *The Green Room* begins with documentary images of human beings engaging in competitive massacre and concludes with the image of flickering candles. The film is not comforting. It demands that we become aware: that we see the contradictions. Once again Truffaut is our Balzac—the *auteur* is a witness to his time.

NOTES

1. I have gone into these themes further in several articles: "François Truffaut's *Two English Girls*," *Film Quarterly* (Winter 1973), 29-31; "*Day for Night:* A Truffaut Retrospective on Women and the Rhetoric of Film," *Film Heritage* (Spring 1974), 21-26; Truffaut's *Adèle H:* The Twilight of Romanticism," in *Women in the Cinema*, ed. Kay and Peary (NY: Dutton, 1977), 50-56.
2. Truffaut quoted in Annette Insdorf, *François Truffaut* (Boston; Twayne, 1978), 246.
3. The photographs in the chapel echo a scene in *Day For Night* when the camera focuses on the images of directors who have influenced Truffaut and are part of our film heritage: Dreyer, Bergman, Godard, Hitchcock, Rossellini, Bresson.
4. I think one of the other images in the chapel—a thirties photograph of an orchestra conductor—is Maurice Jaubert the composer of the score of Vigo's film *L'Atalante* (1934)—Jaubert's music accompanies *The Green Room*. Truffaut further alludes to Vigo's film in that Jean Dasté, the young husband in *L'Atalante* appears in *The Green Room* as the kindly owner of the out-of-date provincial newspaper and one of Julien's few living friends. The allusions to *L'Atalante*, if recognized, are poignant: Vigo's film celebrates romantic love and marriage as a mythic journey through life; they are ideals that haunt Truffaut's Julien. Maurice Jaubert died young, a casualty of World War II.
5. And of course André Bazin, whom Truffaut has memorialized in many ways.

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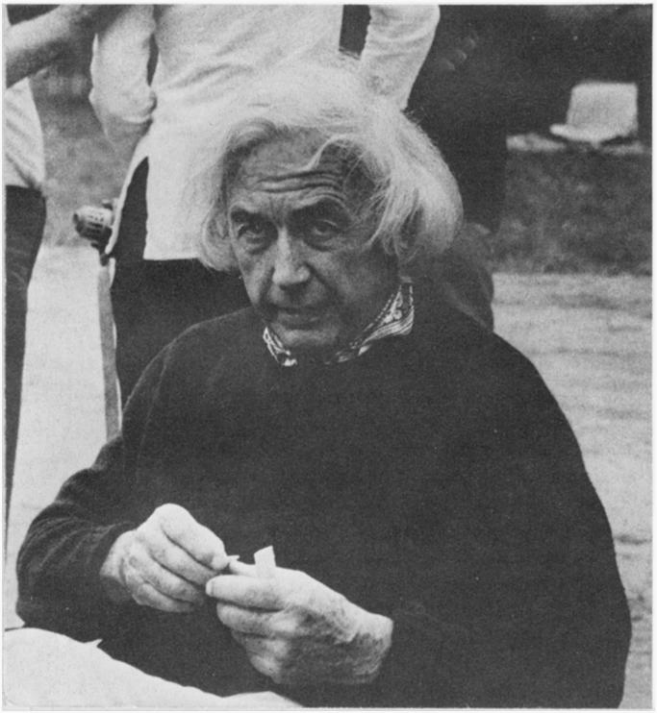
MICHAEL DEMPSEY

Despair Abounding: The Recent Films of Robert Bresson

Spare, austere, restrained, severe, bleak—words like these typically appear in every description of Robert Bresson's films. Certainly, they all apply. No film-maker has ever denied us more intransigently so much of what we tend to regard—rightly—as the pleasures of cinema: all those "forbidden" delights of acting, overtly beautiful imagery, styles of editing and camerawork and art direction and scoring and special effects which "vulgarly" manipulate us—all of them bastardized tricks of "filmed theater," which is what the very term "cinema" means to him. His kind of film-making he calls *le cinématographe;*[1] some of its components are monotone line readings, automatic gestures, and untrained "models" instead of actors and their false expressiveness; flat rather than eye-catching imagery; elliptical editing which compresses emotional peaks and often omits even climactic scenes; chaste camerawork which hides faces as often as it reveals them or holds on spaces after characters have vacated them. Whether you call it "spiritual style," like Susan Sontag, "transcendental style," like Paul Schrader, or Bresson's "universe," like Amedée Ayfre, it is a style which portrays life as Calvary, in which mortification is endless and all surfaces, human or material, obdurately resist yielding "insight" or "meaning."



◀ *Bresson shooting* LANCELOT OF THE LAKE

But the hill of Calvary leads finally to eternal ecstasy in the next world for those who are able to climb it. Despite the forbidding chill which any account of Bresson's methods may suggest to people who do not know any of his work, he is actually a fountainhead of faith in the reality of this eternal ecstasy. He marshals his expressive resources toward final shots which seek to draw this same faith from us. The glowing cross and the voice intoning, "All is grace," at the end of *The Diary of a Country Priest* testify to Bresson's certainty that the spirit of the impoverished, cancer-ridden young cleric has flown from its prison of flesh and earth to everlasting fulfillment in the bosom of God's love. The last image in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*—the charred stake on which her body has been burnt to ashes—evokes the immortality and the liberation of her soul. In *Les Anges du Peché,* Thérèse, murderess hiding in a convent as a postulant, responds to the death of a saintly young nun who tried to help her by reaching out to accept the handcuffs which the police snap onto her wrists. In *Pickpocket,* Michel must be jailed before he can learn what freedom really is. Fontane's flight from another prison, in

A Man Escaped, emblemizes the soul's submission to God and his grace, which inspire him to risk his carefully plotted escape by taking a last-minute cellmate, Jost, along with him. Bresson has been the most optimistic of film-makers; every facet of his fastidiously cultivated technique has striven to show the way to Paradise.

But all this has changed drastically during the past dozen years. During that time, Bresson made his first color films—*Une Femme Douce* (1969), *Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971), *Lancelot of the Lake* (1974), and *The Devil Probably* (1977)—and they all have something else in common: the waning of transcendence and the rise of despair. The importance of this change in tone for a Catholic film-maker cannot be overstated. In the past, as Marvin Zeman has pointed out,[2] Bresson has often seemed interested in finding exceptions to Catholicism's official condemnation of suicide, which continues to be a major preoccupation in the color films. But justifying despair is an even more extreme step. To a Catholic, despair is by definition an "unforgivable" sin because it denies that even God has the power to save one's soul—which amounts to a denial of God's very existence, at least as a Catholic defines God. Yet despair suffuses Bresson's recent work, without the compensating imagery of salvation which completes his earlier films.

Instead, the color films portray the withering away of transcendental hope. One example is especially pointed. In *Une Femme Douce,* a young wife caught in a destructive marriage kills herself rather than accept her suffering any longer or cling to hope for earthly relief. Yet Bresson offers no sign that, after death, she finds heavenly relief. In the story by Dostoyevsky on which he based the film, the tormented woman leaps to her death clutching an icon, which seems to reveal her faith that God will forgive her for the sin of taking her life. This image seems made for Bresson, yet he rejects it; his "gentle creature" has a crucifix, but she leaves it behind. Each of the color films has an equivalent conclusion; each conveys little or no sense of an afterlife; each implies a God who is either silent, indifferent, or non-existent.

All of this puts a distressing new construction on a major element in Bresson's work: the religious paradox of co-existing predestination and free will. Either a mystery or an absurdity, depending on your beliefs, this conundrum proposes that God, being all-knowing, knows every detail of every human life in advance, in particular whether a given person will be saved or damned; yet, at the same time, human beings have free wills, choose their destinies. To Catholics and some other religionists, what reconciles the halves of this flagrant intellectual contradiction is "grace," that enigmatic soul-illumination through which God indicates his will and inspires—but does not force—us to submit to it. According to theologians, such grace is strictly *unwilled, unbidden,* a divine gift; we can do nothing to merit it, though we can refuse it. By accepting it, we accept our predestined fate, God's will for us, yielding superficial liberty to gain profound liberty. Thérèse reaching for the handcuffs; Michel touching Jeanne through the wire mesh of his cell and murmuring, "What a strange road I have taken to reach you"; Fontane discovering, after he decides not to kill Jost, that he could not have escaped without Jost's help—these are some of Bresson's past embodiments of this reconciliation between predestination and free will. To Bresson, as Zeman puts it, "Life consists of finding out to what we have been predestined"; or, as Paul Schrader states, "The drama is whether or not the character (or the viewer) will accept his predestined fate . . . Man must *choose* that which has been predestined."[3]

UNE FEMME DOUCE

Which is fine, if you happened to be predestined to salvation. But this is a theological Gordian knot; for, if we are predestined to a given fate, then we are equally predestined to choose or reject said fate. Not that logic necessarily matters to believers in this creed. When I was a Catholic seminarian, during high school and early college,

even the most intelligent priest-instructors avoided or evaded discussing the matter. There is simply no way to deal with it rationally. You either believe that, through grace, Fontane freely accepts rather than murders Jost, or you believe that this choice is also predestined, hence no real choice at all—which means that you reject the entire paradox and with it Catholicism and perhaps God as well.

While working on *The Devil Probably*, Bresson told Schrader, "I think there is predestination in our lives. Certainly. It can't be otherwise."[4] But without an accompanying sense of transcendence, of "grace abounding," belief in predestination renders life not the hill of Calvary but the mountain of Sisyphus. Both inflict long, intense agony; but the first promises ultimate salvation, while the second offers only ultimate futility. In one respect, Bresson's statement is ambiguous; he does not say *how much* predestination there is in our lives. But whether he believes its role to be partial or total (and how could it be partial?), the change in his manner of dealing with it in his films has been grim. The black-and-white films depict predestination to suffering which culminates in glorious transfiguration. The color films depict predestination to the same suffering only to have it end in extinction.

UNE FEMME DOUCE—Scenes from a Marriage as Hell

This new predestination without salvation shapes the very structure of *Une Femme Douce*. Following Dostoyevsky, Bresson shows the heroine's suicide at both the beginning and the end of the film, so that there is never any doubt about her fate. In place of Dostoyevsky's icon and the film's crucifix, Bresson grants her a secular token of elegy: the white shawl which floats in the air after her body has struck the earth. We wonder if Bresson will show something more the second time we witness the suicide. He does—but it proves to be an image of horror.

Une Femme Douce is such a baleful film because, in the absence of a transcendental dimension, it must finally make the pain of the heroine and the pawnbroker she marries utterly useless. Between the suicide scenes, Bresson intercuts "present" scenes of the distraught husband pacing around the wife's laid-out corpse and "past" scenes from their relationship. Desperately talking to himself or their maid, he struggles to fathom the tragedy and his own role in it. Not that the answer to the central question—why did she kill herself?—is any mystery. We quickly discover that poverty, not love, drove her into a soul-destroying union with a cold, money-grubbing, stiflingly possessive man who snuffed out all pleasure and hope for her. But if this said everything, *Une Femme Douce* would be simply a remake of *Gaslight*. Within this level of obviousness is something else that is far from obvious: what *precisely* pushes the wife over the brink? When she kills herself, the marriage seems to be improving. Her husband has blamed himself for all their misery and sworn to make their future bright. This is what haunts him as he paces around her corpse. But her death refuses to yield comforting insight, to him or to us.

This mismatch quickly degenerates into brutal psychological warfare, which takes the form of either caustic words—he attacking her for "overpaying" pawnshop customers, she ordering him to stop dominating her with money—or killing silence. The marriage grows to be so lethal that we look for an excuse to question the film's depiction of it. Unfortunately, Bresson's adaptation has provided one. The notion that the wife (she and the husband are nameless in the film) truly has no other option except pawning herself to this crabbed man is a lot harder to accept in modern Paris than in Dostoyevsky's Russia. The mumbo-jumbo surrounding her "sinister" relatives, who never appear but supposedly help force her into the marriage, is just as clumsy. These elements create confusion at the heart of the film. Nearly everything in it pushes us to blame the husband for the whole disaster. Yet the wife's unconvincing motivation suggests, perhaps unintentionally, that the marriage is an act of masochism for her. Yet we cannot tell where this masochism comes from because, as always, Dominique Sanda, who plays the wife, suggests anything but a "gentle creature." Even in this, her first film, she seems much too vibrant and self-reliant to let Guy Frangin's emotionally parched stiffneck shackle her.

Yet this blurriness certainly adds to the atmosphere of opaque incomprehension which seeps through the film like slow poison. Bresson's style undermines even their wedding night, one of their

few happy experiences, by pointing up the groom's uneasiness with the bride's mischievous sensuality. Thereafter, sexual passion still flows between them —as Bresson himself has said, the film's color is keyed to the warm blush of Sanda's skin—but it is rising hatred which fuels the passion, except for some tender moments which she initiates. After one steely encounter, the husband narrates: "That night we made love as usual, but her attitude had changed, and I only wanted to possess her body." Bresson's most grisly touch is running this line over an image of her cadaver as he circles it in anguish. The film builds to one creepily sadistic episode in particular. After an especially sharp quarrel between them, the husband carefully leaves out a pistol before going to bed alone. The next morning, he feigns sleep while, just as he planned, she finds the gun, clicks the hammer, and all but presses the muzzle against his face. This is the closest that Bresson has ever come to conventional suspense; the moment is frightening even though we know that she will not pull the trigger. Afterwards, he is able to play cunningly on both her shame at nearly commiting murder and her uncertainty about whether or not he was really asleep.

This part of the film does suggest *Gaslight;* there is no doubt that, in episodes like this, he is actively working to destroy her psychologically and emotionally. In their new book *Self and Cinema: A Transformalist Perspective,* Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder declare that everything in the film, including the elements which appear to condemn him (even when he condemns himself, as he often does through his narration), actually reveals him as an endlessly devious sado-masochist totally intent on absolutely nothing besides destroying the wife's sense of her own experience in order to subjugate her ever more profoundly.[5]

This approach to the film yields a lot of fresh insights, but I feel that it also misses the deepest source of its despair. Point-of-view in *Une Femme Douce* seems thoroughly confused. Commentators routinely state that the body of the film consists of flashbacks, yet Bresson has stated firmly that "there are no flashbacks in the film."[6] Unless he is simply being perverse, this must mean that, as far as he is concerned, the images of the marriage are *not* being filtered through the husband's subjectivity; instead, they are elliptical but objective pictures of what happened between the couple. Yet the film's structure encourages us to treat them as his distorted, undependable memories, as their *entirely verbal* equivalents certainly are in the Dostoyevsky story. Which possibility is true

Guy Frangin and Dominique Sanda in UNE FEMME DOUCE

is not just an academic matter. The film's narration unquestionably belongs to the husband, but it is not the entire film the way the narration in the story is the entire story. The imagery of the film is what the story lacks, and that imagery is too distinctively Bressonian to express anyone else's subjectivity, including the husband's. For proof, look at the wife's suicide and her last moments alone in her bedroom; stylistically, they are identical to the rest of the film, even though the husband did not witness them. Why is this important? Because it indicates that, without diminishing the husband's responsibility for the wife's death in the slightest, Bresson is not presenting him as an endlessly devious sado-masochist *only*. If he were, the film would be just a rarefied good girl-bad guy melodrama.

Bresson is after something larger: the fundamental impurity, corruption, and inadequacy of all our motives and acts. A small but key example comes early, when the (future) wife pawns her crucifix. As the pawnbroker weighs it and offers more money than it is worth, he suddenly describes himself with a line from Goethe's *Faust:* "I am part of that force which does evil." Now he may well be, as Houston and Kinder maintain, flaunting his education. But he is also sincerely baring the full acrid depth of his bitter self-loathing, which he longs to escape. When she smiles kindly and adds, "Or good," to the quotation, he feels a sudden freshet of hope for deliverance from his repressed, avaricious nature through union with her (virtually the same deliverance that Jeanne offers Michel in *Pickpocket*). Yet the flaws in his nature are too deep-rooted; he cannot stop viewing her *simultaneously* as an object to be possessed. In *Une Femme Douce,* such contradictions merge inextricably; he is *both* a cruel manipulator and "a husband pining for love," and she is a willing victim (whether or not Bresson intended this) *as well as* a brutalized innocent.

This byzantine confusion of motives brings about the final tragedy. The husband flings himself at the wife's feet, extravagantly begging for her forgiveness. She reacts with confusion and distrust, just as we do. Is he sincere? Or is this just another power game? When he says, in the present, "What I felt was not pity for her; I was full of enthusiasm; no one can understand my emotion," we see a tear rolling down his cheek, in the past, just before he throws himself at her this way. But can we trust that tear? Why did he feel enthusiastic? Because he had hit upon a clever new way to control her? Or because he truly envisioned future happiness for them both? Why can (note the change of tense) no one—including us, presumably—understand his emotions? Because they are truly ineffable, or because he is rationalizing his perfidy? When she cries, "And I thought you would desert me," is she glad or unhappy? What could break through such an impasse? Only grace, only a leap of faith. Had the old Bresson made this film, grace might have entered precisely at this point—or shortly thereafter, when the husband abruptly embraces the wife "like a madman." Then *Une Femme Douce* might have been like Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia,* in which a similar leap of faith suddenly dissolves the bitter estrangement of another married couple. But, without this possibility, the couple in *Une Femme Douce* cannot reach one another. Even if his change of heart is totally sincere, it comes too late; she has been too severely damaged for such belated rescue. And during his sudden embrace, to him the act of a tender lover, we see what he cannot see: the distant, responseless pallor of her face as he holds her. Despair and tragedy are inevitable.

The ambiguity surrounding the marriage also envelops her suicide. Seconds before jumping, she smiles at her mirrored image. What does this signify? We can guess, but we will never know. And what are the effects of her death? She escapes unbearable pain, achieves "freedom" and "autonomy" (if such terms have any useful meaning in this context). Yet, as Charles Thomas Samuels told Bresson, "Her suicide is a hostile act, dooming him to an eternity of grief unmitigated by understanding" (just as killing him would have doomed her). To which Bresson replied, "Of course."[6] He underlines this by having the maid look in uneasily moments before the wife jumps and then observe the death leap too late to prevent it. We may imagine that the maid, whom we have barely noticed throughout the film, will suffer as much as the husband will. The wife obviously never considered this or did not care.

Compare her suicide to the one that climaxes *Mouchette,* which is a spiritual victory, as Bresson

treats it. When the mistreated young rural girl splashes offscreen into a pond to drown, he holds his camera on the rings which ripple serenely across the water's surface and adds coolly lovely notes from Monteverdi's "Magnificat" to the sound track—signs that God has mercifully embraced her soul. But *Une Femme Douce* ends with the husband lifting the wife's head as she lies in her coffin, imploring her to open her eyes for just one second, and then—dreadfully—the lid sliding onto the coffin and a hand bolting it down. No comforting music, no icon of redemption, no "freedom" or "autonomy"—just a cadaver locked inside a box to rot. Unlike *Mouchette,* which suggests that its heroine is better off dead, *Une Femme Douce* suggests that its "gentle creature" would have been better off if she had never been born.

LANCELOT OF THE LAKE—The Dark Void

A nightmare of the quick and the dead in a dimming cosmos, *Lancelot of the Lake* immediately violates one of Bresson's primary maxims about film-making. Explaining to Samuels why he used the floating shawl in *Une Femme Douce,* he said, "since I try never to show anything that is impossible, and since, of course, Dominique Sanda does not actually hit the ground . . ." Yet *Lancelot* opens with a gory decapitation in close-up. As the knights continue fighting, their helmets hiding their faces, the neck of the beheaded knight gushes a geyser of blood onto the ground. Later, the tournament at Escalot features crashing combat with heavy lances, and the climax returns to the forest of the opening scene for more slaughter. The sound track reverberates, tersely and harshly, with the clashing of broadswords, the splintering crunch of spears against shields, the penetrating thuds of arrows piercing armor or stabbing horses. In *Lancelot of the Lake,* Bresson's style shows a new crispness, a gnashing, angry snap; even his customary narrative elisions feel unusually draconian. This tougher tone, this willingness to bend old rules, seems to reflect a deepening desperation.

Unlike Bresson's other color films, *Lancelot* returns to a lost world of courtly ideals and Catholic dominance, only to discover the same malaise there which the color films isolate in contemporary society. After sketching the tattered end of the disastrous quest for the Holy Grail, the film takes King Arthur and the chastened Knights of the Round Table back to Camelot. During the quest, several knights died; others plundered and pillaged aimlessly—Bresson gives us brief shots of riders wrecking a chapel and a sword sweeping an altar clean. Mournfully surveying the chamber of the Round Table, Arthur resolves to close it permanently, partly out of fear that he and the survivors have outraged God. But, instead of regrouping, the remaining knights form rival factions, one gathering around their greatest hero, Lancelot, who they hope will rally them to renewed glory, the other supporting Mordred, who opposed the quest and now plots against Lancelot.

Grimly, Bresson rips away nearly every vestige of romance, pomp, and magic from the material. As Jonathan Rosenbaum has mentioned, *Lancelot of the Lake* contains no trace of the Lady in the Lake, Merlin's sorcery, or Merlin himself;[7] he might have added, no Excalibur, no "lily maid of Astolat," no "Gaily bedight, a gallant knight, in sunshine and in shadow . . ." We seldom see Bresson's knights out of their armor, which is always creaking and clattering. At first, this touch gets laughs; each time the knights walk or move, they sound like garbage cans banging together. Yet as we grow used to this noise, the armor takes on sinister qualities. Encased inside it, the knights look insectoid, like a strain of humanoid beetles walking the earth following some cataclysm. Helmets mask and unveil already opaque faces according to intricate rhythms; during one argument, knights raise their visors to speak, then lower them after each line. This use of armor underlies the primitivism and the savagery lurking beneath the facade of knighthood—which also emerges from Bresson's references to superstition's infiltration of Catholicism. Spiritually if not historically, *Lancelot of the Lake* parallels *Robin and Marian;* both limn the decay of knightly honor and religious idealism, sending mythic heroes to wintry deaths.

In his color films, Bresson's religion-rooted style mirrors this sense of lost faith. Like the Catholicism which nurtured it, this style is based upon suppression—of the aforementioned "forbidden" elements of film. But as the power of religious faith has blurred and faded in his work, many of these "forbidden" elements have crept into it: the modern Parisian settings and details of *Une*

Femme Douce, Four Nights of a Dreamer, and *The Devil Probably;* the overtly "beautiful" imagery of *Four Nights;* the graphic violence, action, and spectacle in *Lancelot of the Lake;* the uses of nudity and more glamorously attractive "models" (especially women) in all four. In *Lancelot* above all, we feel the conflict between this new interest in the "forbidden," both theological and cinematic, and Bresson's restraining formalism—a conflict which parallels Lancelot's guilt over his attraction to Guinevere. *Lancelot of the Lake* often threatens to burst the steely bonds of Bresson's style and become a Sam Peckinpah film. The resulting tension makes it, purely as a piece of direction, the most exciting of the color films.

Bresson's handling of the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere reflects this as much as his treatment of the violence does. Unable to regain his bearings after the quest, Lancelot feels torn apart by conflicting loyalties—to God as Lord, to Arthur as Liege, to Guinevere as lover. By renouncing the last, his most secular oath, and reverting to religious asceticism, he blindly hopes to regenerate himself and the Round Table. Bresson uses the stoic, chiseled face of Luc Simon for its craggy aura of angst; his Lancelot cannot hope to make an absolutely correct decision. When he tries, his confusion only grows. After resolving to join Guinevere instead of the tournament at Escalot, he changes his mind and competes anonymously, winning so brilliantly that the onlookers guess his identity and cheer this restoration of his knightly prowess. But the tournament's brutality only deepens his revulsion against the tooth-and-claw viciousness which the knightly code gilds with high-flown talk of honor and God.

◀ *Guinevere (Laura Duke Condominas)*

The significance of Guinevere (Laura Duke Condominas) is clear the instant we first see her: she is the only character who never wears armor, who is visible from head to foot all the time. So it is she who carries out the film's contrast between the hard imperviousness of armor and the soft vulnerability of skin. But this statement alone is too abstract; her allure is openly sexual. Laura Duke Condominas seems physically slight, in stature a girl-queen, especially when juxtaposed to the armored knights. But Bresson takes full advantage of her intent gaze and vibrant voice. Whenever she approaches the metal-sheathed Lancelot, he is plainly mesmerized, and so are we; such proximity is tender, comical, and kinky all rolled into one. In another scene, the camera starts on her calves as she stands nude in a wooden tub while attendants bathe her, then rises past her thighs, buttocks, and gleaming back. The lush image contradicts the lives of the knights: bare flesh so enticing that we want to stroke it ourselves, in a world of metal skin; utter defenselessness where dangerous weapons and plots are the norm. Even when the shot ends in close-up on the back of her head as she gazes narcissistically into a small hand mirror, Guinevere looks even more ravishing.

But she is not just a sensual delight; she explicitly challenges Lancelot's knightly code. She condemns his attempt to use the will of God as an excuse to renounce their love. To her, this obsession with serving God ascetically is just masculine vanity, which would possess a divine token like the Grail, or even God himself, like a trophy. Refusing to agree that the disasters which have befallen the knights are God's punishment for their adultery, she intones: "I am the one who was created to help you, the one who will cross this dark void with you," and there is no doubt that she speaks for Bresson. The spare, eloquent image of her lit window against the darkness of the night and the castle establish her as the film's prime beacon of human light: "Our only woman, our sun," the knights call her. Amid God's silence or absence, she assumes the role of grace.

But what she represents cannot save Lancelot

Lancelot and Guinevere

or anyone else from chaos. When he rescues her from imprisonment, he only precipitates more carnage, as his forces war against Arthur's loyalists. Bresson elides the main battle, concentrating on its aftermath, particularly the pointless death of Lancelot's staunchest supporter, Gawain, whom Lancelot himself, failing to recognize him in his armor, struck down by mistake. At the height of this new catastrophe, it is Guinevere, not Lancelot, who sacrifices their love by returning to Arthur in order to end the war. As they walk together toward Arthur's camp, the camera catches her bare hand holding his mailed wrist—a melancholy completion of the film's central motif—and then, as they separate for the last time, her palm as it brushes fleetingly over his uncovered hand. After this moment, the final part of *Lancelot* plunges even deeper into despair than *Une Femme Douce* does. Mordred rebels against Arthur, and Lancelot sets aside his grievances to defend the king. But right away we lose all sense of who is fighting whom; from this point onward, we do not so much as glimpse a human face again. Bresson recapitulates the massacre in the forest from his opening scene, but with a ghastly addition: bowmen raking the knights from the trees, rendering them nakedly vulnerable despite their armor. We sense that one of those pivotal instants in history has dawned, when warfare escalates to previously unimagined levels of destruction—like the advent of new atomic rockets in *The Devil Probably*. At such a moment,

values like fealty to lover or sovereign or even divinity seem like tissue paper defenses against annihilation.

The old Bresson would still have found a way to pass Lancelot into paradise; now that doorway is sealed. Yielding Guinevere, standing by religion, defending his liege—none of these sacrificial acts assuages his grief or regenerates his sense of divine providence. His is the most chilling death in all of Bresson's films. We see a plainly dying knight, identity hidden by his armor, stumbling to a clearing in the forest, where a pile of other knights, all dead, lies like a scrap heap. From inside his armor, one lofting word finally reveals him: "Guinevere!" He topples onto the fallen knights, the metal wreckage clanking once. Bresson cuts to a silent shot of a gliding bird, then returns to Lancelot as he sags in death, his armor clanking one last time. Perhaps Bresson would maintain that this bird, like the shawl in *Une Femme Douce,* evokes the presence of God. But what we remember are the piled-up knights, their armor now their coffins, and that flat, dull clank. In *Lancelot of the Lake,* it is not grace but death which abounds—death with no life beyond it.

THE DEVIL PROBABLY—Worldwide Suicide

The Devil Probably might have arisen from the concluding clank of *Lancelot of the Lake.* Returning to the modern world, Bresson has made his *Salò,* a shriek of desolation at what he views as humanity's lemming-like rush to extinction. Charles, a young student, drifts toward suicide because he cannot bear the manifold social, political, and ecological horrors of our world. His friends try urgently to dissuade him. Two women, Alberte and Edwige, take turns living with him, offering devotion and love-making. Institutions and activists present more rational-based reasons for staying alive: revolutionaries at a cellar rally; liberal and conservative Catholics debating "Whither the Church?"; a psychoanalyst who minimizes Charles's agony as mere neurosis; another companion, Michel, whose crusading study group monitors ecological rape and promotes science as the key to solving the world's problems. The film, then, covers the pleasures, the dreams, the hopes which keep us believing, against the worst evidence to the contrary, that it is better to go on living than to die. But they are not enough for Charles. "I see too clearly," he tells the shrink. "That is my dilemma." So he hires a junkie, Valentine, to shoot him dead in a cemetery. It is not surprising to learn that *The Devil Probably* was nearly banned in France for "inciting the young to suicide" (and why the young only?); the film is a virtual brief for suicide.

Once again, Bresson has admitted "forbidden" elements into his work, this time direct social comment and footage of ecological disasters, screened by Michel's study group, which appears to have been shot by others. Bresson defines social evil in terms of ecological callousness, represented by these images of fume-spewing factories and jets, poisoned animals and trees, mounds of garbage and trashed car hulks, a grounded tanker polluting the ocean, nuclear explosions, the baby seal hunt in Newfoundland, brain-damaged children of the Minamata mercury pollution. Of the latter, Michel declares, "These pictures can't be shown enough." Bresson heightens the impact of the footage (a first for him, except for short clips from *Benjamin* in *Une Femme Douce*), putting his own stamp on it, through terse editing and some augmented sound effects, like the smash of the club which slaughters one baby seal. It is startling to find Bresson, so insistent on "abstraction" and "timelessness" in his films, slamming home this topical indictment so bluntly, like a Trappist switching robes with a hanging judge.

Charles and Bresson both despair of any possible cure for this monstrous decadence. The cellar revolutionaries sloganize stupidly for terrorism ("Je proclame la destruction," one shouts repeatedly); the film caricatures and curtly dismisses politics as part of the problem. Religion gets a longer hearing but the same verdict. While the rival Catholics wrangle, in a manner straight from the John XXIII-Second Vatican Council era, Bresson highlights the cavernous emptiness of the gothic cathedral where they meet and the discordant bellows of its pipe organ as a repairman tinkers with it. Later, Charles spends a night there, playing Monteverdi choral music and contemplating the cathedral's grandeur. Earlier, he had quoted Victor Hugo on how God vanishes from a church the instant priests enter it. No priests appear now, but neither does any heavenly illumination, any

grace. Psychoanalysis is equally impotent; Charles's shrink offers Freudian clichés and smug preachments about "adjusting" to society. Bresson vents his well-known disdain for "psychology (of the kind which discovers only what it can explain)"[1] on this sub-Mazursky cartoon. But the scene does yield Charles's fiercest outburst, when he opens an ad-laden magazine and cries, "Losing life, I would lose . . ." and then reads off all the consumer goods so rapidly that my pen could not keep up with his passionate torrent. About all Charles has left is some minimal belief in God, who will, he states, not punish him for committing suicide, for not understanding what no one can understand. Yet he has nightmares of being beaten even after death. And again, Bresson renders a suicide worthless in any larger sense. After the opening titles, he cuts to two successive editions of a newspaper, the first claiming that Charles killed himself, the second changing him to a murder victim. The ending explains this discrepancy. After shooting Charles, Valentine places the gun in his hand to make his death look self-inflicted—but forgets to wipe away his own fingerprints. Thus, as far as anyone will ever know (unless his friends say otherwise), this Charles person died not to protest the contamination of the world but because he met a homicidal addict. Even the film's title, which provides a convenient scapegoat, is ironic. The sense of futility is total.

Obviously, all this is intolerable. So we seek to discredit Charles, as we do the portrait of marital hell in *Une Femme Douce*. We fix on the film's unfair treatment of political action or the "sub-Mazursky" shrink. Or we deny that the film is "really" about all this horror. François Truffaut assures us:

> Ecology, the New Church, drugs, psychoanalysis, suicide? No, these are not the subjects of *The Devil Probably*. Its real subjects are the intelligence, the seriousness, and the beauty of the young people of today, and particularly of these four of whom one could say—quoting Cocteau's remark in *Les Enfants Terribles*—"the air they breathe is lighter than air."[8]

Louis Malle (a former assistant to Bresson) tells of sitting next to a note-taking critic during the 1977 New York Film Festival:

> And I imagined that he had a very misconceived idea of what the film was about . . . probably thinking he should talk about ecology, about the old man's vision of the world—everything that has to do with what Bresson worries about a lot, but which for me is very naive, very clichéd. What is fascinating about the film is that it looks like Pascal—it's all about grace, about people with a gift for life, which is something divine . . . it's a completely mystical film. When he deals with the news, it's foolish. And I'm sure Bresson would agree with me. In an interview in a French newspaper, he said: "You know, it's not a statement about the new generation—actually I was projecting some of my own memories about my childhood.[9]

In one respect, these statements are cop-outs; they implicitly dismiss Charles as a misfit, an over-reactor, a whiner, a defeatist. Charles is none of these things, yet the impulse to dismiss his vision *is* justified. What barely makes *The Devil Probably* watchable is Bresson's awareness of this. Just as Luis Buñuel's lack of overt pity for his characters provokes us to pity them (according to André Bazin), so also does the very relentlessness of Bresson's case for suicide goad us to dispute it. And, as Truffaut and Malle discern, despite Charles's airtight logic, he does not have all the arguments on his side.

The young people in the film are indeed fascinatingly beautiful, both physically and spiritually. As Alberte and Edwige, Tina Irissari and Laetitia Carcano suggest light and dark ministering angels, and Henri de Maublanc imparts a handsome gravity to Michel. As for Charles, Antoine Monnier gives him a faintly androgynous allure; he suggests a lark shot out of the sky tracing a lyric curve down to earth. Quoting Leonardo da Vinci, Bresson has urged us to think above all about the surfaces of artworks.[1] In *The Devil Probably* the surfaces are, along with the horrors, these examples of human loveliness, which use physical beauty to highlight spiritual beauty—Charles's probing honesty, the loyalty of his friends to him. At times, the very ineffectiveness of their efforts to "save" him is comically touching, as when Alberte becomes con-

Antoine Monnier and Tina Irissari: ▶
THE DEVIL PROBABLY

vinced that a shrink is all he needs or when she sobs out her hope that he will regain his zest for living, while he pats her mechanically. After struggling in vain to out-argue Charles, Michel finally snaps in exasperation, "I want to live even if it's illogical." Bresson parallels his steadfastness toward Alberte with hers toward Charles, when she leaves him to live with Charles. Bresson gives special emphasis to their reconciliation: as they walk toward traffic, she suddenly says, "Embrasse-moi," and the camera holds on their embrace for ten seconds or more. It is "illogical" to pose such flimsy intimacy as a counterweight to evil abounding, which is why Bresson does it.

He also repeats his strategy in *Une Femme Douce* by making the precise catalyst for Charles's suicide uncertain. Why, instead of killing himself directly, does he pay Valentine to do it? This ambiguity is another frail barrier against total nihilism. Early in the film, Alberte and Michel read in Charles's diary: "When will I kill myself, if not now?" But Charles does not kill himself "now." Later, he sits by the Seine at night, examining a bullet before firing it into his brain. But he fires it into the river instead. The idea of paying Valentine to kill him comes, ironically, from the shrink, who tells how ancient Romans contemplating suicide sometimes hired their own executioners. There is something ceremonial about the way that Charles and Valentine walk to the cemetery, as though completing the Stations of the Cross. Does this appeal to Charles? Would dying *alone* be too unbearable? Has he hired Valentine in order to protect the integrity of his logic against last-second, "illogical" fear? We can only wonder. Right up to the final instant, like Rossellini's Socrates, Charles still yearns to speak: "I imagined that my thoughts would be sublime at this moment, but—" The same applies to Bresson; making this expression of his despair, he demonstrates that it is not quite absolute.

The last shot of *The Devil Probably* holds its contradictions—the "logical" case for suicide, the "illogical" impulse to continue living anyway—in precarious balance. After Charles dies, the camera watches Valentine first walk, then jog away into the background, along a path barely visible against the night. Once again, there is no trace of transcendental feeling; the image conjures up Guinevere's "dark void." Yet the shift from Charles to Valentine is revealing. Sick and gaunt, Valentine (Nicholas Deguy) is a negative image of the other characters, a wretched zombie who scorns charity and cares for nothing but his next score of smack. Yet he, too, wants to live, even if it's illogical. Earlier, in the most flamboyant effect of his career, Bresson begins the Monteverdi choral music which Charles plays in the cathedral over a preceding image of a syringe filling with Valentine's blood during a heroin injection. Our minds leap back to this astonishing shot as the camera watches him vanish, then holds on the empty path before fading out silently. Bresson pays tribute, finally, to the tenacity of the life force in a parched, attenuated world, yet how bitter a tribute. And how sad if *The Devil Probably* proves to be his last film.

FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER—The Kingdom by the Seine

Yet his age and the mounting difficulty of funding even the most commercial projects, let alone his kind, make this dire possibility more and more likely. So I wish that somehow chronology could be rearranged to make *Four Nights of a Dreamer* his newest film instead. When it first appeared, Carlos Clarens wrote prophetically: "Because it is noticeably less stark and sombre than any Bresson picture to date, *Four Nights of a Dreamer* is headed for a low place in the director's canon."[10] But, after the renewed desolation of its two successors, it may have more to show us today than was apparent in 1971—a good reason to place it out of sequence here.

None of this makes *Four Nights* exuberant even by Bresson's standards; it, too, dwells on isolation and despair. But, unlike its companion films, it also has not merely moments but long passages of weird, soaring elation. Again, Bresson transposes Dostoyevsky to modern Paris ("White Nights," in this case). Jacques (Guillaume des Forets), a reclusive young painter, labors in his loft over semi-abstract, cool-hued canvasses and recites into a tape recorder variations on a reverie of "pure and innocent" love in a medieval setting. When he goes outside, he often trails and watches strange women without trying to pick them up. When he finds Marthe (Isabelle Weingarten) poised

to jump from the Pont Neuf one night and coaxes her off the parapet, it is as though his medieval fantasy has unexpectedly come to life. When Marthe tells him that she was contemplating suicide because a lover has failed to return to her, as promised, after completing a term at Yale, Jacques (one might say "chivalrously") tries to sustain her fading hope, while yearning to replace the other man in her heart. However, their four nights of rendezvous by the bridge end when the other man finally does return and Marthe abruptly abandons Jacques. Knowing recent Bresson, we expect him to take her place on the Pont Neuf, even if we also know that "White Nights" ends in a burst of irrational joy. But Bresson follows Dostoyevsky; Jacques remains alive—returning to his painting, thanking Marthe into his tape recorder for the love and happiness she brought him, even so briefly, during these "luminous, marvellous nights."

Unlike *Une Femme Douce* and *The Devil Probably, Four Nights of a Dreamer* uses a time-shifting structure *without* predestining its characters by revealing their fates in advance. Bresson has also lightened Dostoyevsky's material with odd, frequently awkward comic touches. Jacques is his looniest hero, and our introduction to him is downright wacky. After a pre-titles shot of him hitch-hiking in Paris, we pick him up traipsing through a field, looking resigned to the necessity of communing with nature but plainly having no idea how to do it. So, with stoic determination, he turns two somersaults. It is a "Huh?" moment; we wonder if we are supposed to laugh, until we see some people nearby also going "Huh?" Later, gleeful with hope for a Great Love with Marthe, he tapes cooing pigeons and his own chants of "Marthe," playing the chants everywhere he goes (oblivious to gawkers); then, to his amazement, he starts seeing her name all over the city—in a store window, on a cargo barge. Bresson makes him a giddy Pierrot beneath his dead pan; if it were raining and this were a different movie, he would be singin' in it. Bresson seems to have caught his own whiff of this ether; witness his use of a trip to the movies by Marthe and her mother to stage a nutty *film noir* send-up, complete with gats, George Raft suits, Max Steiner crescendoes, and a perforated gunsel gazing soulfully at a picture of his

FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER

moll before croaking his last. Of course, this parodies the Grand Passion that Jacques and Marthe seek. But what makes it elusively touching is the very "inappropriateness" of Bresson's style when it confronts the "forbidden" in yet another form—in this case, a spoof which Blake Edwards could have tossed off with ten times his expertise.

But Marthe's story has an eerie erotic expressiveness far surpassing anything else Bresson has done. She becomes fixated on the newest lodger in the apartment which she shares with her mother, yet she fearfully avoids meeting or even seeing him. Then, alone in her bedroom one night listening to music, Marthe becomes so turbulent with free-floating emotional and sexual longing that she suddenly removes her nightgown and begins to preen languidly before a full-length mirror. Bresson films her semi-abstractly, like living sculpture: framing her from the neck down as she slumberously sways and turns, then intercutting her taut, now sensually alive face and loosened, silken hair with her slowly flexing legs, as her absorption in her feelings and her desire-permeated flesh increases. Afterwards, when she has turned the music off, we hear sounds from the lodger's neighboring room, and Bresson cuts to a shot of his hand rapping on the wall. It is as though their mutual yearning had telepathically mingled through the walls which separate them physically; Marthe feels this so strongly that she covers herself even though she is still alone. The following day, after she goes into the lodger's room, Bresson places them in a standing nude embrace as they hide silently from her mother, who, paranoid about male treachery, prowls and calls for Marthe. Bresson's austerity flowers in a wondrous new way during these frankly

sexual scenes. "I believe in the value of concentration in this respect as in any other," he told Clarens,[10] but the enrichment flows both ways. Capturing both the blocked surge of sensual desire and its fragile fulfillment, he makes erotic attraction play virtually the same role here that religious grace plays in earlier films: an *unwilled, unbidden* transfiguration which binds and frees simultaneously. As Jacques proposes telling the lodger in a letter he offers to deliver: "She cannot defend herself against her love for you."

Nor can Jacques defend himself against his own love for Marthe. He tries to live out the fantasy of saving, comforting, and finally winning the adoration of a lovely, mysterious woman. Though fully aware of this perversity, Bresson celebrates the feelings which begin to flow between the two self-absorbed dreamers. Without abandoning his visual precision, he surrenders along with them to the beauty of the Parisian evenings. The irridescence of the life around the bridge recalls the nighttown of *American Graffiti,* and the arrival there of a glowing *bateau mouche* creates as stunning an effect as the landing of the alien spaceship in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind.* Cutting inside the boat to a velvetly seductive Latin band as rainbow colors shimmer, liquid yet ghostly, through the boat's glass canopy and off the river, highlighting the hippie-troubadours who strum along the quais, reflecting the whole enchantment off the faces of Marthe and Jacques, Bresson suggests that the ecstatic tenderness which they want is *not* a mere illusion. No film has ever conjured up a more bewitching vision of rapture.

However, Bresson also points up the cruelty of romantic obsession. As Marthe and Jacques exchange intimate details of their lives, we expect them to drop their misty dreams and fall in love with each other. But Marthe keeps on using the word "love" carelessly, when she means devotion or affection: telling Jacques that she "loves" him because he is not "in love" with her or that he fears the lodger's return lest it reveal this "love" of theirs. She completely misunderstands Jacques's emotions; genuine love for her has overwhelmed him, unwilled, unbidden, just as genuine love for the lodger overwhelmed her in the same way. But, regardless of his wish to do so, Jacques simply cannot arouse in Marthe the same desire that she arouses in him and the lodger arouses in her; such desire, like religious grace, is "the wind (that) blows where it will." Bresson subtly underscores their confusion by sharply separating the parts of his narrative from one another with titles like *Histoire de Marthe, Histore de Jacques, Première Nuit*—suggesting that, like the stories and the nights, the dreamers will be unable to merge.

Yet they do try, in a way unique to Bresson's films. When, despite her letter, the lodger still fails to appear, Marthe curses him bitterly and hides in the darkness along the river; her romantic dream now looks hollow and ridiculous. Jacques's hesitant approach pushes her into a fury of lamentation which makes him walk away, profoundly depressed. Grasping his true feelings at last, she stops her self-pitying outcries and goes after him. Then comes another of those Bressonian moments which evoke complex emotional interchanges through the simple eloquence of two people touching one another. When Marthe catches up, Jacques calmly opens her cloak, tells her quietly of his love, then embraces and caresses her. After an instant's hesitation, she folds her arm acceptingly around his neck—a muted echo of her nude embrace with the lodger. What makes these gestures, this muted echo, so significant in terms of Bresson's "theology" is that they signal the *refusal* of Marthe and Jacques to submit to "predestined" fates—in this instance, her obsession with the lodger and his inability to evoke the same obsessions with himself from her. Moments later, sitting in a café with Jacques, she sums up this conflict between "unbidden" love and "chosen" love: what she feels for the lodger will fade because she did not choose to feel it, but her new feelings for Jacques will last because she *decided* to feel them. By this point, Bresson's hypnotic depiction of the four nights has induced us to agree; we could happily see the film end now, with each telling the other of the strange roads which have led them to one another.

But this "chosen" love is another fantasy, and Bresson's direction of the next moments destroys it breathtakingly. As Jacques and Marthe leave the café, newly pledged to each other, he renews our pleasure in the nightlife around the Pont Neuf with additional exquisite images: Jacques wrapping a red-and-white gift scarf around Marthe's neck, a candle burning on a street musician's

guitar case. Just as we see the candle, Marthe is telling Jacques to come live in the lodger's old room, and he is gazing up at the moon. But she is looking levelly at something else: the lodger approaching through the crowd of night people. He sees her, calls to her. Then, with shocking swiftness: she rushes to him, Jacques looks down to see her reach him, she kisses him, she runs back to kiss Jacques three times, she vanishes with the lodger, Jacques watches. Bresson has never directed a crueler, more piercing moment of disillusionment than this.

Yet he implicitly accepts Dostoyevsky's fervent, contradictory concluding lines: "Good Lord, only a *moment* of bliss? Isn't such a moment sufficient for the whole of a man's life?" Instead of quoting these lines, Bresson permits us to notice the reflection of the "luminous, marvellous nights" in the colors of Jacques's paintings. "Call it a happy ending if you wish," Clarens writes.[10] I do, and I will.

But, as we have seen, Bresson moved on to darker endings. *The Devil Probably,* in fact, almost extinguishes several of the most poetic motifs in *Four Nights of a Dreamer:* the *bateau mouche,* the hippie life along the Seine, the embraces. Will Bresson's art, craft, and reflections, cultivated so mandarinly and so heroically these many years, end here, as Pasolini's did? Had Pasolini not been murdered after completing *Salò,* he might have fallen into creative sterility, unless he could have found a way not to deny but to transcend his despair. So it may be with Bresson. I think of Alfred Hitchcock saying that his love for film was stronger than any morality and hope that Robert Bresson's, even now, remains stronger than any despair.

NOTES

1. Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe.* Gallimard, 1975. (English translation: *Notes on Cinematography.* Tr. by Jonathan Griffin, Urizen Books, 1977)
2. Marvin Zeman, "The Suicide of Robert Bresson," *Cinema* (Beverly Hills), Vol. 6, #3.
3. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer.* University of California Press, 1972.
4. Paul Schrader, "Robert Bresson, Possibly" (interview), *Film Comment,* September-October, 1977
5. Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder, *Self and Cinema: A Transformalist Perspective,* Redgrave Publishing Company, 1980.
6. Charles Thomas Samuels, "Robert Bresson" (interview), in *Encountering Directors.* G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972.
7. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac,*" *Sight & Sound,* Summer 1974.
8. François Truffaut, "Vive Robert Bresson," printed statement distributed during Filmex 1978.
9. Jonathan Cott, "Fires Within: The Chaste Sensuality of Director Louis Malle" (interview), *Rolling Stone,* April 6, 1978.
10. Carlos Clarens, "Four Nights of a Dreamer," *Sight & Sound,* Winter 1971-72.

MICHAEL KLEIN

Truffaut's Sanctuary: The Green Room

Shortly after I wrote this article my mother had a stroke, and after a long period of suffering—paralysis, blindness, inability to speak and, gradually, the onset of a kind of madness—died. She died leaving nothing, nothing tangible except a few photographs. After her death I lit a candle in memoriam, not out of any kind of orthodoxy, but because it seemed to keep her memory alive in the room, to bring back memories of the past. And then, at first dimly, I recognized the correspondence with James's story and Truffaut's film: the candle in the fireplace was an altar to the dead, not unlike Julien Davenne's construction in *The Green Room,* and for similar reasons: it was an attempt to maintain a sense of continuity and thus meaning between past and present in the midst

guitar case. Just as we see the candle, Marthe is telling Jacques to come live in the lodger's old room, and he is gazing up at the moon. But she is looking levelly at something else: the lodger approaching through the crowd of night people. He sees her, calls to her. Then, with shocking swiftness: she rushes to him, Jacques looks down to see her reach him, she kisses him, she runs back to kiss Jacques three times, she vanishes with the lodger, Jacques watches. Bresson has never directed a crueler, more piercing moment of disillusionment than this.

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of what a speaker at my mother's funeral pointedly called "the business of life." I mention all this because at times in film criticism we can lose sight of the basics—the way art can lead us back to common experience with renewed feeling and understanding.

The Green Room, based upon Henry James's "The Altar of the Dead," has neither been well received nor widely distributed, although in recent years Truffaut's films have automatically been ensured a fair amount of status. However, I believe that it merits attention in spite of a certain indulgence and a studied absence of rhetoric. In one sense *The Green Room* is a film for a limited audience: an *auteur* film by an *auteur* film-maker for a privileged community. It is perhaps of interest that Truffaut in his criticism *(The Films in My Life)* has defended significant directors who at a point in their career change their styles or surrender some of their sparkle and perfection in an attempt to focus on their basic concerns with greater clarity.

> Okay, Charlie doesn't make us laugh any more . . . The Man who made *The Gold Rush* can, if he wants to, make his public laugh or cry at will . . . The film [*A King in New York*] doesn't broaden out or force itself upon the viewer. There are no scenes that are amusing or ironic or bitter. (p. 57, 59)
>
> The *Golden Coach* is a key film of Renoir's because it connects the themes of a number of his others . . . It is a film constructed like the "box game," one inside the other. (p. 43)
>
> Hitchcock has long been judged by the flowers he places in the vase. Now [*Frenzy*] we have at last realized that the flowers are always the same . . . (p. 89)

However, what distinguishes *The Green Room* from the late works of Chaplin, Renoir, or Hitchcock, which it very much resembles in its introversion, is that the director is conscious of his predicament: the subject of the film is *both* the limits and value of withdrawal and hermeticism in art and life. The film is Truffaut's green room, James's altar, a space into which a sympathetic friend is invited to share the author's concerns. But it is also not unlike the sanctuary on the fringe of the wilderness in *Fahrenheit 451* where the book people huddle, withdrawn into the texts that they memorize in limited defiance of the forces of technological decadence. Although Truffaut's concerns are self-referential they are far from trivial or solipistic. Like the late somewhat privatistic works of Godard, *The Greem Room* is a meditation on contemporary culture and society. Unlike Godard's, Truffaut's critique is traditional and humanist rather than revolutionary, stoical rather than engaged, doggedly unfashionable rather than avant-garde. Nevertheless the quietude of the film masks an alienation that might be called subversive, an exploration of human isolation in an inhuman society and of the strength and limitations of moral and aesthetic purity.

Truffaut's recent works not only increasingly refer back to his previous films, they press us to respond to them as one long film, to view them as a continually developing retrospective: as the work of an *auteur. The Green Room,* the story of a man who devotes himself to creating an altar to the past, makes us aware of how often the male characters in Truffaut's films are isolated from human contact, incapable of sustaining friendships with either men or women, and driven by romantic obsessions that lock them into themselves.

The themes of estrangement from human contact and romantic obsession have been primary in most of the films that Truffaut has made over a period of twenty years. Perhaps we have tended to overlook this because of the surface lyricism of *Jules and Jim.* Yet even that film concludes with Jules alone, in the cemetery, cut off from any other possibilities in life. At the conclusion of Truffaut's preceding film, *Shoot the Piano Player,* Charlie Kohler is seated at the piano, locked in his own isolation. His wife and lover are dead. He has no friends. The film is his memory of the events that have estranged him from the world; the memory is his only solace. Montag in *Farhenheit 451* is alone in an oppressive society; he is friendless, estranged from his wife and cut off from the literary and artistic record of human experience. Pierre Laschenay, in *The Soft Skin,* is self-enclosed and devoid of contact with either his mistress (who leaves him) or his wife (who kills him); work and romantic obsessions propel him through his life to his death.

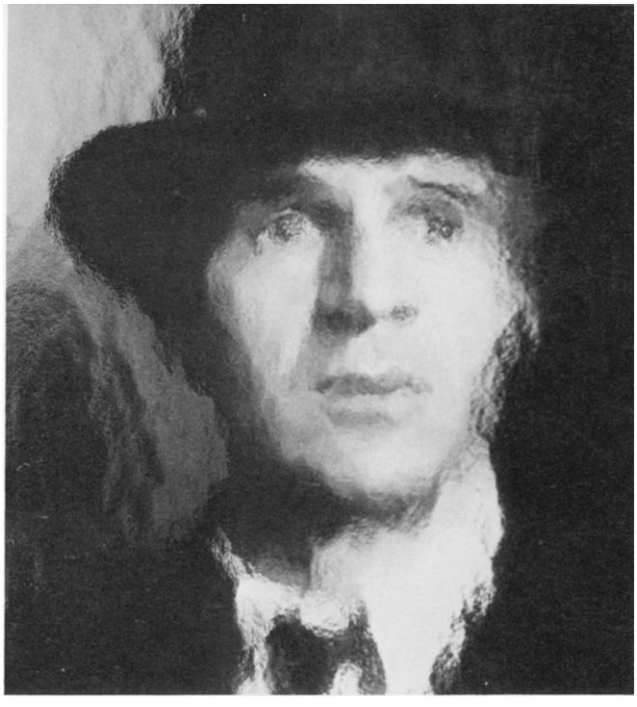
Jules, Charlie, and Pierre illustrate different aspects of the alienated and withdrawn Truffaut hero. In the semi-autobiographical Antoine Doinel series (five films so far) the Truffaut persona, portrayed by Jean-Pierre Léaud, grows from child to man: at age 30 he is as isolated from others as was the child who stared bleakly at us in the final

image of *The 400 Blows,* Truffaut's first film. In *Love on the Run,* the latest film in the series, Antoine's solipism, obsessive egoism and excessive romanticism are the source both of his vitality and of his inability to sustain relationships.

While most of the Antoine Doinel films are comedies, if only on the surface, two other characters played by Léaud are more overtly unsettling. Alphonse, in *Day for Night,* completely locked into his own ego, is rejected and severely criticized by his companions. Claude, at the conclusion of *Two English Girls,* wanders middle-aged and alone thinking of the past: Anne is dead; he is estranged from Muriel; time has passed and the world is changing.

Bertrand Morane, *The Man Who Loved Women,* is another variation on the basic romantic Truffaut persona. Like Jules and Jim who pursue an image of Catherine, he engages in obsessive quests after the images of the women he encounters in life. The affairs have meaning as anticipation and in retrospect, as chapters in his book: as memory. Adèle Hugo, the heroine of *The Story of Adele H.,* is a female variation, whose romantic obsession propels her beyond the bounds of convention and possibility. She risks everything for her vision, and dies alone in a mental hospital, withdrawn, seeking refuge in memories of the past that she has preserved as art, encoded in a secret journal.[1]

In *The Green Room* François Truffaut plays the role of the Truffaut persona: the *auteur* and his concerns are directly objectified within the film. Julien Davenne, the protagonist, has withdrawn from life to build a shrine to the memory of his dead wife and the friends of his past. Like Adèle Hugo, who built a shrine to her former lover, Julien's obsessions isolate him from other people. More explicitly than that of his predecessors, Julen's alienation is more than the result of a personal or romantic obsession. He may be mad, but if so it is the social madness of Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener or Kafka's Hunger Artist. Truffaut's latest film is especially disquieting as it situates his long-standing concerns in a larger prospect.



François Truffaut: self-portrait through glass: THE GREEN ROOM

The Green Room is set in a provincial town in France ten years after the conclusion of World War I. Julien Davenne, who works as a writer for an old-fashioned journal, most of whose readers have died, lives as a semi-recluse with an old housekeeper and her mute ward, in a house within which he has created the "green room" as a memorial to his wife, Julie, who died ten years before. His life is disturbed by his meeting the daughter of an old friend, Cecilia; the green room is partly destroyed by fire. Julien rebuilds an old chapel making it an altar to his wife and to his friends from the past—an altar to "his Dead." He confides his obsession to Cecilia and invites her to preside over the altar with him, but cannot admit her candle in memory of her dead lover. Cecilia comes to represent a counter-principle to Julien's ethic of enclosure and his retreat into the past. She too mourns the dead but maintains that they are best honored by the reaffirmation of life. There is a dialectical tension in the film: her words often prevail in the dialogue, but his outlook dominates the images. At the conclusion of the film Julien and Cecilia are momentarily reconciled; but then, denying that his relationship with Cecilia meant anything to him, Julien dies before the altar of his shrine.

Truffaut adapted his film from James's tale "The Altar of the Dead" with minor references to two other James tales, "The Beast in the Jungle," and "The Friends of the Friends." "The Altar of

the Dead," set in the late Victorian period, centers on a romantic relationship: Stransom, a man of substance, actively pursues a mysterious lady in characteristic Jamesian fashion; they are finally reconciled at the moment of his death, before the altar dedicated to his wife and other friends.

In the film, set in the late twenties, the Julien-Cecilia relationship is neither mysterious nor romantic. Julien, unlike Stransom, is a little fellow, an everyman figure; a survivor of the trench warfare of World War I, he is as representative as Chaplin but without his resilience. His life gains a social and historical dimension in the film, which is prefaced by images of the war: trenches, scrambling soldiers, forests of barbed wire, corpses. Truffaut's face is superimposed over the documentary footage, staring at the scene in sadness and horror. The preface significantly expands the work's theme of concern for the dead beyond Julien's memory of his wife, and thus transforms James's material from a story about a personal obsession to a parable about meaning and value in the modern world. The images of the trenches are familiar to us. They are a part of our collective social memory—"our Dead." The action of the film is explicitly located, as the caption which concludes the preface tells us, ten years after World War I "in which millions lost their lives." As in *Jules and Jim* and *Two English Girls* the war is viewed as a cultural watershed, ushering in a period destructive of life, coherency and humane values.

Truffaut's Julien withdraws from life, preserving the memory of his dead who live by codes that are being destroyed in a world that is increasingly competitive, manipulative, and functionalist. He withdraws to preserve their values by means of a privatistic or self-enclosed creative act that few can fully comprehend or appreciate, which further isolates him from other people. Thus his actions are at once affirmative of life and self-isolating or anti-life.

This contradiction is conveyed by spatial metaphors which illustrate the way in which such moral estrangement has both positive (order, coherence, meaning) and negative (isolation, confinement, imprisonment) aspects.

Julien's icon-like photographs of his wife Julie are enclosed in multiple frames: strong wood frames, or thick ridges of marble, massive strips of gilt. In the chapel (itself shut within the cemetery walls) her shrine is enclosed by iron altar gates. Her image is thus carefully preserved—enclosed, defined, and ordered—but also imprisoned.

Julien seldom appears in the film outside of a confining space: heavily furnished rooms, the walled and gated cemetery, his black car, inside the altar gates. Close-focus shots further enclose him. Even his eyes are framed inside severe rectangular glasses. Julien inhabits carefully enclosed space throughout the film. While the locales are often sanctuaries they also confine in an oppressive way, like space in a prison.

The first image of Julien's altar to the dead is constructed by Truffaut to emphasize this dual quality of sanctuary/prison. We first see the altar from a high angle in deep focus and the unusual feeling of open space in the film is exhilarating. But as the camera moves closer we become aware that the altar is shut off behind a heavy iron gate; portions of the gate crudely block our view of Julie's photograph. When we pass within the gate the space becomes cramped and confining.

Later in the film Julien suffers a heart attack and dies in his sanctuary behind these bars. There is a look of animal-like bewilderment on his face as he cries out in anguish and pulls loose from Cecilia's attempt to comfort and support him. His last words seem a denial of the possibility of human contact, and at the same time an affirmation of his private faith, of a source of meaning that will link the past to the future.

In death Julien falls out of the frame of the

image. The camera focuses on Cecilia's face as she lights a candle for him at the center of the altar of the dead. Then she moves out of the frame. For the most part the film has been composed of close-ups of human faces. Thus we are stunned by the absence of a human reference in the final image. The affirmation is abstract and chilling: the flickering candles that are a memorial to life also deny the concrete presence of life.

Truffaut appears to be noting the human cost of a quest for meaning and value in the world. The dead are celebrated, the meaning and memory of their lives affirmed. But as an idea—not in Julien's experience nor, by implication, for most of us. The comfort is Romantic and Keatsian: art and memory preserve what time attenuates and destroys. However, Julien's altar is more subjective than a Grecian urn for it is not the expression of an achieved, public cultural ideal but more a personal heterocosm, a refuge against the dominant culture.

In their privatism, both Julien's altar and its extension, Truffaut's film, estrange themselves from the world. The cost of moral vision is isolation, a failure to fully sustain communication, a failure of rhetoric. In a sense, Truffaut incorporates this criticism into his work, making a film that is, at times, a negative example, risking estrangement from a general audience in order to affirm his vision. Two aspects of this are especially striking: often both the action and the spatial representations in the film are comprehensible not as mimesis of experience but as figuration; often the film communicates to us primarily through references to other Truffaut films—that is, only to those who share a fund of common cinematic images and memories.

Space in *The Green Room* is predominantly not mimetic but moral and psychological. And not only in the way images or characters are framed —the very rooms in the film are psychological and moral matrices. The title of the film does not so much refer to the room in Julien's house that was devoted to the memory of Julie but to the film as a whole which is the director's own green room. *The Green Room* is replete with inward-turning allusions which make sense often only if we are familiar with the green room of Truffaut's imagination—with the images and concerns that recycle throughout his complete *oeuvre.* Even the names echo those of characters from other films: Julien or Jules in *Jules and Jim* (Jules's photo appears in the chapel to the Dead); Julie as both the devil's party avenger of *The Bride Wore Black* and the idealized Julie of *Day for Night.* Julien, in an apparently gratuitous scene, has an effigy of Julie that he has commissioned smashed to pieces because it turns out to be grotesque and inadequate. The reference is to the idealized statue that prefigures Catherine in *Jules and Jim,* and to the mannequin that Bertrand becomes, in a nightmare, in *The Man Who Loved Women.* Emulating Julien's obsession, his housekeeper's boy gets out of bed at night, goes into town, steals a mannequin, is caught, and placed behind bars in a prison cell. The scene recalls the young Antoine Doinel stealing a photograph of Bergman's Monika in *The 400 Blows;* and the director's (Truffaut's) dream in *Day for Night:* the memory of the time he, as a child, stole a photograph of *Citizen Kane* from inside the barred gates that close off the foyer of the cinema.

In filling his film with these and other strongly felt but somewhat esoteric references Truffaut risks becoming obscure. He insists, however, upon calling our attention to the process of art as inherently self-referential. The references are a way of affirming meaning, of re-encoding signs from culture and experience. Because the purest expression of this may of necessity be ultimately self-enclosed, the artist risks becoming isolated in the attempt to affirm the meaning of lives and events that have become at best inert symbols, cryptic or exhausted signs. Truffaut seems aware of the contradiction, of the step he has taken in this direction. He identifies with Julien, up to a point: "without going as far as Davenne, who is obsessed, loving the dead more than the living, I find that remembering the dead permits one to struggle against the transience of life."[2]

What then are the aspects of Davenne's vision that Truffaut affirms? In the final sense Davenne's altar is a statement of resistance against the dominant culture that is represented not only by the overt barbarism of World War I but by the ruthless, competitive, manipulative and conformist aspects of public life in modern society. Against this he marshals fragile images of lives that repre-

sent different values: a man who was honest and an example to his community, a man who was shy and appreciated by his friends for his gentleness, two lovers who were inseparable and exemplary in their devotion . . . Many of the images (photographs in the chapel[3]) are finally so private, so introverted, that we can not easily grasp their significance. They exist for Julien and for Truffaut. Some however are more public: an image of Jules (Oscar Werner in *Jules and Jim*) emerges as a touchstone of value; iconic representations of Herny James, Henri Bergson and, I believe, Wilde and Cocteau, stare at us through the flames and gates of the altar.[4] The signs are somewhat privatistic. But they are signs—signs that we are invited to appropriate as our own. Truffaut's dead also include Adèle Hugo (her journal, written in a private code, is the source of *The Story of Adèle H.*), Jean Itard (his memoirs are the source of *The Wild Child*), Jules, Jim, Catherine, Anne, Muriel, Claude—and Antoine Doinel (Truffaut's childhood and past).[5] The film invites us to add our own dead to the list.

The dead are Julien's family, an extended somewhat unconventional but very modern family, a personal and cultural community that is a source of comfort, continuity and coherence. In Truffaut's work, while human relationships certainly are important and are the main focus of the narratives, a shared sense of participating in a cultural tradition is often the cement that holds together fragile human contacts (in *Fahrenheit 451* Montag, Clarisse and the book people devote their lives to memorizing and thus preserving key *textes*, in *Day For Night* Truffaut and the film-making group gather to participate in a common creative endeavor, in *The Green Room* Julien and Cecilia attend their dead). In moments of deeply felt isolation and loneliness Truffaut's characters often reach out on their own for a kind of cultural communion (in *The 400 Blows* Antoine creates an altar for Balzac, in *Two English Girls* Claude sees Rodin's sculptures as a touchstone of a passing age). The many allusions to film, art and literature in Truffaut's works, far from being indulgent, extrinsic or elitist, are kindred attempts to commemorate and thus link with traditions and values which have become subcultural and privatistic and in so doing reflect a larger crisis, one that hovers on the margins of the film.

In *The Green Room* the candles and photographs are a light show, a metaphor for film and art in general. At one point Julien has a dream in which the candles converge in patterns, counterpointed to the sound of the artillery of war. It is a fitful dream, something of a nightmare, but also an affirmation of life, art and humanist traditions against flux and decadence. *The Green Room* begins with documentary images of human beings engaging in competitive massacre and concludes with the image of flickering candles. The film is not comforting. It demands that we become aware: that we see the contradictions. Once again Truffaut is our Balzac—the *auteur* is a witness to his time.

NOTES

1. I have gone into these themes further in several articles: "François Truffaut's *Two English Girls*," *Film Quarterly* (Winter 1973), 29-31; "*Day for Night:* A Truffaut Retrospective on Women and the Rhetoric of Film," *Film Heritage* (Spring 1974), 21-26; Truffaut's *Adèle H:* The Twilight of Romanticism," in *Women in the Cinema*, ed. Kay and Peary (NY: Dutton, 1977), 50-56.
2. Truffaut quoted in Annette Insdorf, *François Truffaut* (Boston; Twayne, 1978), 246.
3. The photographs in the chapel echo a scene in *Day For Night* when the camera focuses on the images of directors who have influenced Truffaut and are part of our film heritage: Dreyer, Bergman, Godard, Hitchcock, Rossellini, Bresson.
4. I think one of the other images in the chapel—a thirties photograph of an orchestra conductor—is Maurice Jaubert the composer of the score of Vigo's film *L'Atalante* (1934)—Jaubert's music accompanies *The Green Room*. Truffaut further alludes to Vigo's film in that Jean Dasté, the young husband in *L'Atalante* appears in *The Green Room* as the kindly owner of the out-of-date provincial newspaper and one of Julien's few living friends. The allusions to *L'Atalante*, if recognized, are poignant: Vigo's film celebrates romantic love and marriage as a mythic journey through life; they are ideals that haunt Truffaut's Julien. Maurice Jaubert died young, a casualty of World War II.
5. And of course André Bazin, whom Truffaut has memorialized in many ways.

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BARBARA HALPERN MARTINEAU

The Films of Marta Meszaros or, The Importance of Being Banal

Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.

—Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," 1928.[1]

In the women's movement we are beginning to discover our experience; to make it conscious and tellable and to invent for it the symbolic forms adequate to its representation . . . In learning to speak our experience and situation, we insist upon our right to begin from where we *are, to stand as subjects of our sentences and to hear one another as the authoritative speakers of our experience.*

—Dorothy Smith, "Women and Psychiatry," 1975.[2]

In Hungary today, as I see it, it just doesn't matter in any way that I'm a woman when it comes to directing films. True, I had a harder time getting myself accepted as a director than I'd have had if I were a man; and in a way, I'm still regarded as something of an oddity.

—Marta Meszaros, 1977.[3]

When I first started going to see "art" films, usually European, I noticed that people talked about their favorite director, usually Bergman or Fellini, instead of their favorite star, or, God forbid, their favorite plot (I mean, I used to prefer stories of beautiful misunderstood girls who were discovered in bookstores by handsome rich men, etc. etc.) Having grown up as a bookworm I could relate with fair ease to this new category; after all I had devoured Louisa May Alcott's books and Lucy Maud Montgomery's, and even, more recently, Tolstoy and Dickens and Carson McCullers, so why not go to see all of Antonioni and Resnais's films? It came as something of a revelation later on when I discovered that modern Hollywood directors could be "auteurs" also, and that people like Sam Peckinpah and, Goddess forbid, Robert Altman had themes, motifs and intricate subconscious patterns running thickly through their *oeuvres* to be jumped upon joyously and pressed juiceless by eager young students of the newly respectable academic discipline called filmcrit.

Just about that time I read Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and realized that, except for Carson McCullers (and Louisa May Alcott and Lucy Maud Montgomery whom I hadn't read since I was a kid) all the authors whose books I'd been reading and all the "auteurs" whose films I'd been watching had been . . . not women. Somehow I'd never noticed that. Well, it was easy enough to find women authors beside Alcott and Montgomery and McCullers, women like Duras and Lessing and Woolf and Stein who've produced shelves of wonderful books, but women directors?

Well, of course the history of movies is much shorter than the history of books, and yet, because it all took place in this century, when women are thought to have advanced so far beyond our ancestresses, one might forgivably imagine that the fraction of famous women directors would be a large fraction; if not half then maybe a third? In fact, in 1972 when women started searching actively for our heritage in films, an impressive number of hitherto neglected films by women were discovered gathering dust in archives and on distributors' back shelves. And since then, inspired by the revelation of that work or just emboldened by a newly supportive atmosphere, a significant number of young women have set out to become filmmakers. But the number of women who have made anything like a "body" of feature films in the entire history of film-making does not exceed a score. And, leaving aside experimental, documentary, animated, scientific, ethnographic,

and "personal" films—all areas where women have made significant contributions—and looking solely at the field of feature-length dramatic films intended for a wide popular audience and not for a porn market, there are exactly two women working regularly today who have directed more than three widely-released feature films in the past decade; who are, in other words, comparable to reputable men in the field such as Scorsese or Coppola, Tanner, Saura, Jancsó, Olmi, Truffaut, Ray, comparable in the sense that their names are valid currency in their own production milieux, that they can count on being able to get their next script produced, or if not that, then another. Those two women are Lina Wertmüller and Marta Meszaros.

Other women directors have achieved considerable reputations, but it is easy to forget the realities of their careers. Agnes Varda has made seven features since 1954, one *(Nausicaa)* never released; one in the last decade *(L'Une Chante, l'Autre Pas,* 1976). Mai Zetterling directed four features; the most recent, *The Girls,* was released in 1968. Nelly Kaplan has directed three features since 1969, the most recent, *Nea,* in 1976. Marguerite Duras has directed seven features since 1966, but they've hardly seen commercial release—they play in art cinemas in Paris and to ciné-clubs. Duras, like Chantal Akerman, eludes my category here—she is an experimentalist who has found a way of working in her chosen medium and achieved extraordinary results—which are not commercially viable features, and which reach book-sized audiences. We can only wait to see if Marianne Ahrne, from Sweden, who made *Near and Far Away* in 1976 and *Roots of Grief* in 1978, and who is now working on a feature based on Simone de Beauvoir's *L'Invité,* will break the three-films-in-a-decade barrier for women who make films from a woman's perspective.

The one exception I know of is Stephanie Rothman, who directed exploitation films for Roger Corman: six features between 1966 and 1974. Rothman's films have attracted the interest of some feminist critics as films which parody the exploitation genre—however, she's been unable to attract funding for anything since *Working Girls* in 1974 and says that most producers won't consider her because she's a woman, and that women producers shun her because she's made exploitation films.

> *In my films, as a matter of fact, I tell banal, commonplace stories, and in them the leads are invariably women—I portray things from a woman's angle. Male directors are never questioned to tell why it is that, in their films, they concern themselves with men. If Andrzej Wajda chooses to make a works manager the centre of his film's story, why, that's only natural, that is his problem, that's what interests him. Yet it is always asked of me why I choose women for my films.* —*MM,* Hungarofilm.

There are no women directors comparable, in terms of size and range of *oeuvre,* to the biggies, Buñuel, Renoir, Hitchcock, Chaplin, Ozu. Yet the discoveries of the women's film festivals and screenings during the past seven years have been of one gemlike first feature after another, all accompanied by sad stories of how the director never made another film, or made one, or maybe two more, or even, in the case of Dorothy Arzner, worked for more than a decade before her luck ran out. No margin for error, no scope for development and experiment and magnificent failures for women directors. Lina Wertmüller is the apparent exception who proves the rule—her considerable commercial success seems due to her facility in using women as traditional objects, receptacles, even dumping grounds for male hostility and ridicule. Her greatest success was *Swept Away* (1974), in which a woman learns to adore her rapist and tormentor; the earlier, more ambivalent *Love and Anarchy* (1972) and the recent *Blood Feud* (1979), which are more equivocal about women's need to be subjugated and which hold fascists rather than women up for ridicule, have been considerably less popular than Wertmüller's rape fantasies. *The End of the World in Their Usual Bed in a Night Full of Rain* (1978), which is a thoughtful examination of marriage breakdown in a breaking-down world, passed virtually unnoticed.

All this comes as a long prelude to the introduction of Marta Meszaros, whose films have not been widely seen in North America, but who is the only prolific feminist/socialist film maker reaching anything like a wide audience in the world today, and therefore well worth some agitation and popular-demand-grass-roots-movement-in-favor-of-rerelease jumping up and down on the part of principled filmgoers.

MARTA MESZAROS

Biography:

Marta Meszaros was born in 1931 in Budapest, daughter of Laszlo Meszaros, sculptor, who emigrated in 1936 to the Soviet Union with his family. She went to school there, returning to Hungary in 1946, and later went back to study at the Moscow Academy of Cinematographic Art. She worked at the Budapest Newsreel Studio, then for two years at the Bucharest Documentary Studio, returning to Budapest in 1958 to make documentary films. Ten years and twenty-five documentary shorts later she wrote and directed her first feature film, **The Girl** (1968), which was so successful that she went on to direct two more features in the next two years: **Binding Sentiments** (1969) and a musical comedy **Don't Cry Pretty Girls** (1970). Her fourth feature, **Riddance** or **Free Breathing** (Szabad lelegzet—1973), was based on the research done for another documentary, **At the Lorinc Spinnery** (1971); **Adoption** (1975) won the Golden Bear at Berlin in 1975 and the Gold Plaque in Chicago the same year. Both **Nine Months** (1976) and **Women or The Two of them** (1978) have been shown and received favorable attention at international film festivals, and **Just Like at Home** (1979) bids fair to do the same, but Meszaros, unlike Lina Wertmüller, has hardly become a household name among filmgoers in North America.

An independent woman—one who finds herself in a situation where she must make a decision on her own—is the central character in each of the pictures I have made so far. In The Girl, *Kati is faced with a decision on whether or not she would accept her father and mother, whose identity and whereabouts a search reveals to her many years after they cast her off as an unwanted child. The heroine of* Binding Sentiments *is struggling to free herself from the influence of a relationship that makes her feel cramped, and is trying to adjust in life. In* Riddance [Free Breathing], *the girl chooses even to give up her love after she finds that her partner is a person of weak character. And in*

NINE MONTHS

Adoption, *the woman is trying to find a democratic solution to a relationship that in point of fact admits of none; instead of blackmailing her partner—a married man with children—she chooses to adopt a child.*

The heroine of Nine Months *is the most conscious and most mature of all the female characters in my films. She once had a straightforward, true love affair out of which she had a child she wanted and is strong enough to raise it. She works hard to earn money for the upkeep of her child, and has strength enough left to complete the studies she was forced to break off because of her confinement. Her new love affair, despite a variety of conflicting elements it contains, enriches her as a human person, and she arrives at her decision to have her second child after mature consideration.*

—*MM,* Hungarofilm, *1976, no. 2*

There is a moment in *Nine Months,* and similar moments in each of Meszaros's films, where I was split by a two-sided recognition—of the force of her analysis and of the originality, in feature film, of her feminist vision. The heroine of *Nine Months,* Juli, has just been raped by her lover, who came bursting into her room after they had quarreled. She fights him, then succumbs. The next shot is of him sitting at a table in the same room eating. She, in bed, says to him, "You use me like an animal. Come here." He comes over; she undresses him, kisses him, her breasts exposed in the nightgown he recently tore open, goes to the table and brings food to the bed, and they feed each other, gently. Later in the film, when she comes to believe

that he will not learn from her, that he will not respect her integrity, she leaves him, to have her second child alone. And that birth is a live birth, the last scene of the film but the first to be shot, for the actress, Lili Monori, was pregnant when production started, and she agreed to have the birth filmed. I am still fumbling to find a conceptual framework for the shock of that recognition, that fiction and documentation had come together in the one event which to me is indisputable reality. The closest parallel was the first time I read Doris Lessing's account of childbirth in *The Children of Violence* series—I felt that all other fiction I had read before then had somehow missed or evaded or fallen short of a certain point, that finally, fiction had achieved completion. This is of course illogical, but it remains an unshakeable conviction, and the force of Mezaros' film was even stronger, for after all, on some level, seeing is believing.

> *Sure I am being sensitive in a different way from men. My shots work out differently, too, and it's a different world that emanates from my films.*
>
> —*MM*, Hungarofilm, *'77/2.*

Women (The Two of Them) is Meszaros's seventh feature, and the first in which the main focus is the friendship between two women. It is also the first, as she remarked, to have "a sympathetic male character—albeit he is an alcoholic. He is a sympathetic person because he has a wider view of things, he is a sensitive person who sees life in its complexity and profundity." Without pointing out that Juli's alcoholic husband plays a role usually assigned to a woman in mainline features, Meszaros goes on: "His alcoholism is escapism of a sort; it is the result of his nonconformism and his unstable nervous system. On the strength of his aptitude, his qualities, he would deserve something better than what he has managed to achieve in life." (MM, *Hungarofilm*, '77/2)

In the development of her film-making craft, Meszaros has achieved a flexibility of narrative which allows for inconsistency, especially the apparent inconsistency of an image which seems unrelated to the "story," until suddenly it transforms the story into something larger than itself. From *The Girl* onwards she has shown a tendency to introduce characters who remain peripheral to the action: a young boy who follows the Girl in the streets; the children playing in the woods at the end of *Binding Sentiments;* a young man in *Free Breathing* who works near Jutka and whom she encounters once on her way home; a young woman in *Two Women* who is moving into the hostel at the beginning of the film and is seen once again when Mari sits to have a drink with her at a party; Juli's child in *Two Women,* whose face watching her elders becomes increasingly important to the vision of the film, but whose "character" is never really "developed." Meszaros said about the child, "As we went along with the film-making, Juli's little daughter steadily rose into something close to a principal character"—by the end of the film any possibility of a tidy ending is shattered by the child's uncompromising vision. She has seen her father raving in the pain of an attempted cure for his alcoholism, a spectacle her mother refused to witness, and when she returns home with her mother's friend Mari and hears Mari say to her mother that everything is okay, she runs from them shouting, "You all tell lies! Stop it!"

That is, in part, the role Meszaros plays as writer and director, bearing witness to Hungarian society from her consciously female perspective. She will not tell lies, even if the truth is disquieting. Mari, Juli's friend in *Two Women,* is a serene, respected director of a working women's hostel, confident enough to stand against the bureaucracy in her principled beliefs about how to run the hostel. Yet she is shown in a scene of shocking humiliation, having stirred just enough lust in her lethargic husband to sustain a brief erection, she is then left lying on the floor, legs spread wide, as he climbs drowsily into bed saying, "Come to sleep now." Counterbalancing that scene, and also reproaching by its openness the homophobia of recent "women-centered" American features, is a delightful scene in the show where Mari, enjoying the spray on her body, is joined by Juli, fully dressed, and the two women hug each other and laugh at the ridiculousness of a great many things. Around such moments, small, banal, piercing, a fabric is woven which constitutes an alternative vision.

It is not only the biological perspective of a woman with its enormous emotional implications

which Meszaros explores. Refreshingly for Western audiences, Meszaros concerns herself openly with the economic bases of her characters' lives, and this is always a basic story element in her films: where do these people work, how do they live, and who pays the bills? It is clear in Meszaros's films that there are no women who don't pay, whether salaried or not. The heroine of *Binding Sentiments,* unusual among Meszaros's heroines for not being a factory worker, is an older woman suddenly confronted with the implications of her life when her husband, a respected intellectual, dies. Her efforts to shed her role as a grieving but affluent widow are fought by her son, who literally holds her prisoner in an attempt to make her "see reason," that is, to behave as a woman ought in patriarchal terms. The son's girlfriend goes along with his plans until she becomes sickened by the role of jailer and leaves, and the film ends on an ambivalent note, as we see a ring of young boys encircling, trapping two little girls, closing them in. The image of entrapment is repeated in *Two Women:* Mari and Juli have gone out for a drink, and they are the only women in the bar. They are just getting to know each other, but their conversation is cut short when all the men around them start pushing their tables closer to the two women, closing in on them. The women hastily leave. Again, shock of a disturbing recognition: the social codes are different but the reality of social oppression is the same.

Sometimes the levels of cultural irony are complex, as in *The Girl,* Meszaros's first feature, in a scene where the Girl is visiting her mother, who gave her up to an orphanage as an illegitimate baby. The mother, dressed entirely in black and several centuries older than her daughter, is terrified that her past will be discovered, and she introduces the daughter to her husband and family as a niece. When the daughter arrives the mother is drawing water from a well; she uses it to cook dinner, which she serves while the family eats, and to wash dishes while they sit in another room staring at the television. Finally she comes in and humbly places herself behind her husband, just in time to catch the conclusion of the Miss Universe pageant.

Many of the problems and situations reflected and analyzed in Meszaros's films seem specific to Hungarian society, with its overlapping of rural

ADOPTION

and urban cultures and the consequent overlapping of generations raised centuries apart. And yet this specificity, used in a way that shows the value of the director's long documentary training, works to make the universal issues of the films more accessible, even, to use a word sadly out of fashion, more believable. At the same time, a western audience is provided with a useful perspective from which to view our own cultural peculiarities. The young women in Meszaros's films are salaried and work outside the home, and this is seen as a clear incentive to greater independence and self-reliance, especially when they are specifically compared to older women living virtually in patriarchal bondage. But no illusions are cherished about the deep-rooted attitudes in both women and men which sustain machismo—as, for instance, when the boy's mother in *Free Breathing,* showing Jutka around her house with all its petit bourgeois ornaments, says proudly, "I take care of it all myself. After I come home from work I scrub, dust, and polish." Or, from another angle, when Juli's rejected fiancé in *Nine Months* shouts at her, "Don't you dare to have my child!" and she responds, "I only feel sorry for you." Juli's decision to have her second child alone is shown as thoughtful

THE GIRL ▶

(having passed her exams she now has an excellent job and an apartment to herself) and courageous, but also difficult and painful.

As long as men view us only as objects of their sexual gratification, love machines, beings of a lower order, we women shall only be kind of "third world." Men who have a different view of things are as yet few and far between. I enjoy a privileged situation: I can afford to live the kind of independent life that men live. Artists are a crazy lot anyway, they are taking a good many liberties—more than the average person. But what does a factory girl do? or a woman engineer, or a woman doctor?

This is a rather complex question. Indeed, I believe feminism is one of the fundamental problems of this century.

Just Like at Home, Meszaros's most recent film (1979), is about the relationship between a man and a little girl, the girl played by the same child actress, Zsuzsa Czinkoczy, who appeared in *Two Women.* I think the new film would be stronger had it focussed more clearly and much earlier on the relationship, rather than spending so much time establishing the man's character. He turns out to be another alienated hero, the sort we have seen and heard so much about this century. Although Meszaros certainly has some perspective on her character's weakness, she gets too involved in delineating his problems and doesn't leave enough narrative time to develop the magnificent potential of his relationship with the child.

It never was clear to me why small Zsuzsa was so drawn to grumpy Andras, the egoistic ex-professor who is so wrapped up in his culture shock (having just returned from America) that he can barely see the child. She functions for him as women have so often functioned for men in patriarchal culture—she is a healer, redeemer, someone who reopens his eyes to the beauty of nature and simple things. His function for her is more practical and illuminating from a feminist perspective, for unlike a husband for an older woman, Andras offers Zsuzsa a real chance of escape from her stifled existence as one of seven children in a peasant family. Andras takes Zsuzsa to Budapest, where she can go to school, and, as always in Meszaros's films, the city is seen as a place of freedom for women, at least in comparison to the patriarchal restraints of the countryside. The paradox is powerful, for the city is also alienating and inhuman, while the countryside is beautiful.

Zsuzsa has always wanted a father like Andras, she tells Andras's mistress, thereby provoking the woman to angry tears. Andras, who is apparently tired of his mistress, is very obliging to Zsuzsa—once he has gotten over his initial hostility; he brings her to Budapest to live with him, cook for him, play with him, and go to school. Maybe school will offer her another perspective on Andras, who is frighteningly neurotic, given to spells of deep confusion and anger. There is nothing in the film to suggest that he might hit or molest Zsuzsa, but there is a clear possibility that he might grow tired of her and attempt to send her back to her family, not realizing the change he has triggered in her. The consistently claustrophobic lighting and blocking of the film, the sound-track effects of a helicopter buzzing through an otherwise idyllic scene in the country, and a jet plane roaring over the final scene in the city apartment as Andras remarks that it is "just like at home" build a much darker vision than Andras's remark implies. Zsuzsa's fantasy wish for a "real" father could, after all, not be so simply fulfilled—and the wish itself is born of patriarchal mythology.

Just Like At Home, along with *Binding Sentiments* and *Two Women,* focuses on the problematic consciousness of the "red bourgeoisie," and it shares with those two films a very slow pace and intense ambivalence toward the characters, except for small Zsuzsa, who is simply, stubbornly, wonderful. Taken in the context of Meszaros's other films *Just Like At Home* reflects a growing interest in exploring the male psyche from a woman's per-

◀ Just Like at Home

spective; taken on its own the film seems unbalanced. I longed for much more of little Zsuzsa and much less of big Andras.

. . .

I don't take filmmaking as seriously as male directors do. I simply love shooting films—shooting's the greatest experience I've had in my life.

—*MM*, Hungarofilm, *'77/2.*

NOTES

1. Lecture published as *A Room of One's Own*, 1928.
2. Article in *Women Look at Psychiatry*, ed. Dorothy E. Smith & Sara J. David, 1975.
3. Interview in *Hungarofilm*, 1977, no. 2.

SCOTT MACDONALD

Carolee Schneemann's Autobiographical Trilogy

I have the sense that in learning, our best developments grow from works which initially strike us as 'too much'; those which are intriguing, demanding, that lead us to experiences which we feel we cannot encompass, but which simultaneously provoke and encourage our efforts. Such works have the effect of containing more than we can assimilate; they maintain attraction and stimulation for our continuing attention. —CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN[1]

Though Carolee Schneemann is still known primarily for her work as a performance artist (her new book *More Than Meat Joy* reviews her considerable contributions in this area), she has been an active film-maker since the mid-sixties. She has not made many films, but the accomplishments and challenges of her *Autobiographical Trilogy*—*Fuses* (1967), *Plumb Line* (1971), and *Kitch's Last Meal* (1978)—make her one of our most interesting avant-garde film artists. Ironically, however, the more obvious pleasures of Schneemann's films—their unusual intimacy and emotional authenticity, their sensuous rhythms and gorgeous textures—frequently blind viewers to the considerable formal intricacy and ingenuity of her work.

Like subsequent sections of *Autobiographical Trilogy*, *Fuses* was the result of several years labor; it was begun in 1964 and not completed until 1967. Though it is relatively brief (about 22 minutes at 24 frames per second, 33 minutes at 16 frames per second; Schneemann screens it at both speeds), the density of the imagery demonstrates why the film took so long to finish. Many kinds of sexual activity between Schneemann and James Tenney and numerous aspects of the lovers' environment are recorded in slow, fast, and regular motion; using a wide variety of camera positions and maneuvers (the camera was hand-held, positioned on a stable base, hung from the ceiling, taken to bed . . .), and in a wide range of exposure levels determined by changing times of day, the cycle of the seasons, and by Schneemann's exploration of the 16mm camera. The recorded footage itself was manipulated in a number of ways, so that within *Fuses* we may see multiple print generations of the same image (printed right side up, upside down, sideways . . .), multiple superimpositions of photographed imagery, highly edited passages of brief shots (with the splice marks, perforations, and flares providing their own imagery and rhythms), as well as dozens of levels and forms of imagery created by drawing, painting, and animating directly on the developed film and by a series of more bizarre procedures: baking imagery onto the film and hanging footage outdoors to interact with the elements, for example.

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spective; taken on its own the film seems unbalanced. I longed for much more of little Zsuzsa and much less of big Andras.

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sionist paintings (Schneemann began her career as a painter and continues to think of her approach as fundamentally painterly),[2] the structure of *Fuses* develops from Schneemann's manipulation of visual rhythms. In the most general sense, the film divides into two sections separated by a caesura of pale green imagery of Schneemann, of some cows in a field, and, as the caesura is ending, of Tenney. This 50-second passage (at 24 f.p.s.) is particularly noticeable because the imagery is barely imprinted on the celluloid. Each of the two surrounding sections alternates between periods of dense, multilevelled, highly kinetic imagery and occasional passages of relative calm. In general the same kinds of imagery are seen in both sections; and in many instances, specific images seen during the first section—or images recognizably from the same original rolls—are seen again, in a new context, during the second section. The second section extends the developments begun in the first and continually adds new ones, so it is somewhat longer and more complex. Within the two sections, imagery is organized contrapuntally.

Because of the density of Schneemann's imagery, its visual and metaphoric subtleties are often difficult to recognize without repeated screenings and study on a rewind. At first the film may strike one as chaotic, but it is informed by a delicately constructed architecture of visual relationships, involving color, texture, direction and kind of movement. Careful examination of even a brief passage will discover a complex web of interrelated visual developments involving all aspects of the imagery. Schneemann's imagery is also consistently suggestive in a metaphoric sense, and many details become motifs as the film develops. Windows, for instance, come to suggest the relationship between the activities of the lovers indoors and the cycles of nature visible through the windows, as well as the film process itself: the camera's aperture and the film frame, like the windows, are means for our seeing more clearly. The periodic juxtaposition of Schneemann and the ocean suggests the lunar cycle of the female and the tides (we never see Tenney juxtaposed with the ocean). Kitch the cat's ever-presence is particularly important; at public screenings Schneemann frequently indicates that she attempted to capture what Kitch—an "objective" observer unhampered by societal moral codes and fears—would look at in a given situation.

The fact that the visual explosiveness of *Fuses* is a result of precise, long-term filmic labors, and persistent concern with the frame-by-frame nuances of color, texture, and metaphoric implication demonstrates a view that real eroticism exists in a dialectic with serious, ongoing commitment. The sexual spontaneity and abandon of the lovers is the product of a continual creative exploration by equal partners involved simultaneously (and, as is evident from the passage of the seasons, over a considerable period of time) both in love-making and film-making. The film reveals each of the partners in the same detail and for approximately the same amount of film time, emphasizing a central equity in the relationship and a mutually generative interaction between the processes of love and art.

Schneemann's detailed development of a specifically natural context for the lovers' eroticism suggests that sex is not a single experience with its own limited, "proper" place and function, as usually seems the case in popular and/or pornographic film and literature, but rather is a formative model for human apprehension of the world. Schneemann and Tenney are presented as physical beings, members of a species, different in obvious ways from the animals and plants which live in proximity with them, but similar in their fundamental dependence on their senses, on the resources of their bodies. Schneemann's juxtaposition of individual parts of the lovers' bodies with details of their natural environment—she cuts from a close-up of her pubic hair to a long-shot of a clump of trees, from Tenney's genitals to a bunch of grapes hanging on an arbor—continually reaffirms this attitude, as does her "domestication" of the film-making process itself. In *Fuses* the camera is not a detached observer with its own set of rules. It's a participant in the experience, functioning both as a stimulus and receiver of stimulae. The fact that the imagery recorded by the camera was physically handled and explored by Schneemann for years makes the finished film an extension of the tactile experiences it records. In this sense, *Fuses* can be thought of as a kind of natural accretion which, like the husk of a cicada or a cham-

bered nautilus, is an index to the life processes which created it.

Like *Fuses,* the second part of the *Trilogy* developed directly out of very intimate experiences over a period of several years (it was started in 1968, completed in 1971). *Plumb Line* begins and ends with a 75-second passage which acts as a frame. This passage opens with a still shot of a man's face with a plumb line swinging in front of it. The plumb line disappears; the image of the face begins to move and, simultaneously, to burn. This is followed by two more images—Schneemann and the man in a window embracing; a multi-quadrant blue-toned image of the man's face—which also burn; and finally a hand enters from screen left, fingerpaints the title in silver paint, washes the title off, and signs "Carolee Schneemann" as the image fades to deep red. Within this frame the film develops an intricate set of visual and auditory rhythms and interrelationships. At first, we see complex quartered images (four 8mm images are frequently printed within a single 16mm frame, separated into two pairs by a narrow band down the middle of the image) and full-frame images of Schneemann, or of Schneemann and the man, in a variety of locations: in St. Marks Square in Venice, at the beach, driving through countryside, inside an apartment. The sound track begins several minutes into the film, at first juxtaposed with a passage of full-frame images of still photographs. It's a frequently disconcerting collage of bits of music, sirens, a cat chanting, a tape recorder being turned on and off, agonized roars (they sound like a lion's, but were in fact Schneemann's own), and, later in the film, grim passages of narration by Schneemann recalling, in a troubled voice, a period of physical illness and emotional disturbance. During the film both the sound and visuals grow increasingly complex; everything seems to be happening at once: the various quadrants of the quartered image reveal different imagery in different kinds of motion, sometimes in double exposure; the band which bisects the frame is painted and/or scratched. Finally, the visual imagery slows and for a time is dominated by blue-toned, still passages of quartered and full-frame images interrupted by moments of dark leader; then, Schneemann's narration is added to the track, and both the visuals and sounds move toward maximum density. Near the end, we see Schneemann attacking a series of projected images, which leads into the repetition of the passage which begins the film.

Frame enlargements from FUSES

Within any particular section of *Plumb Line,* details of image and sound are arranged contrapuntally; as the film develops, these details are reiterated at intervals, though both their contexts and the specific manipulations employed vary with each repetition. The film's complexities are fascinating in themselves (for sheer visual and auditory intricacy *Plumb Line* is at least the equal of Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise*), but the particulars of the imagery suggest the meaning and function of these complexities. Whatever the particular nature of the 8mm footage, the scrap audio tapes, and the snapshots which were the film's raw material, Schneemann's exploration tends to discover a consistent sexual politic. Most obvious,

perhaps, is the frequency of imagery which suggests the man's phallic power. The plumb line itself is perhaps the most obvious instance (Schneemann: "The plumb line stands for a phallic measure, a phallic exploration and determination of space"); but there are many others. The first image in the body of the film is of a man sweeping; in several instances we see him holding a short 2 X 4, and standing next to a longer one; and the Venetian imagery emphasizes spires, towers, pillars, arches.[3] Even the vertical band down the center of the quartered image is suggestive.

Other dimensions of this sexual politic are revealed through Schneemann's suggestive use of superimposition. Once in full frame and later in divided frame we see a close-up of the man kissing Schneemann, superimposed with the same image printed in reverse. The result is that Schneemann's face is covered up and the man appears to be kissing himself. In a number of instances superimposed images of the man's face looking in different directions create a Janus-faced figure whose dangerous smile suggest a Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde double nature. In still other instances, we see the shot of the man holding the 2 X 4 superimposed with an image of Schneemann so that she seems to become part of his equipment. In one full-frame superimposition we see a shot of the man and Schneemann with an image of a tiger superimposed over him; the tiger is moved so that it seems to pounce on Schneeman. The implications of such imagery are confirmed by dozens of shots of the man looking confident and self-satisfied, the shots of Schneemann walking back and forth, back and forth—like a caged animal—in St. Marks Square, and by the pain evident in the sound track. Since the imagery Schneemann used to develop the permutations for *Plumb Line* was, in fact, a physical remnant of the relationship, Schneemann's intricate exploration of this material and her organization of it into a multifaceted, cohesive whole is evidence of an implicit decision to take control of what had injured her. Her specific choice of the step-printer is particularly significant in this regard: "The rhythms are all about the passage through the gate of the step-printer. As I was working, the gate became a vulvic metaphor for how much desire, how much recognition was going to be impressed on the finished film."[4] The making of the film, in other words, was a process of examining the remnants of the relationship so that they could be used as part of her own growth as a film-maker. This is confirmed by the particulars of the framing images: all of them have in common the creation of a performance space and time, within which we watch a double-levelled procedure: we examine projected images and (suggestively, once the plumb line has disappeared) we see a record of Schneemann attacking this imagery from outside its space. The images from the relationship are transformed from evidence of a lover's betrayal to the receivers of actions initiated *by* Schneemann, and the record of the entire process becomes an integral part of a new work.

Fuses lyricizes the passionate center of one love relationship and *Plumb Line* exorcizes the painful disintegration of another; *Kitch's Last Meal* reveals a third relationship functioning within an everyday domestic context. The film exists in multiple versions, in lengths up to five hours. The version Schneemann generally uses at public screenings lasts about 90 minutes. We see Kitch eating, cleaning herself, exploring her environment; and we see Schneemann and a man (film-maker Anthony McCall) walking, talking, making love, working, doing everyday chores. . . . These activities are punctuated by the periodic freight train traffic on the tracks which pass the house. We hear collage tapes composed of comments by Schneemann about her work as a film-maker and about the film we're watching ("My film is about digestion"), discussions between Schneemann and McCall (including his discomfort with her tape recorder: "They'll be listening," he complains at one point), the sounds of the train, the radio, kitchen activities and the other recurrent aspects of daily living, and Kitch's purring and meowing.

While the durability of 16mm film—as compared to 8mm—made it an obvious choice for the highly tactile experience of making *Fuses*, and while the transformation of 8mm imagery into a new, less intimate 16mm form was appropriate for *Plumb Line*, the intimate domesticity which surrounded Kitch is reflected in Schneemann's use of Super-8 for the third diary, and in her decision to allow the filmed imagery to stand on its

own, without the mediation of complex printing procedures or the addition of directly applied imagery. On the other hand, Schneemann did devise a formal procedure which adds a dialectically fruitful dimension to the informal imagery. This procedure involves, first, her decision to make *Kitch's Last Meal* a double-image presentation in which two Super-8 projectors are arranged so that one image is slightly larger, and directly above, the other; and, second, her editing the various reels and tapes so that the image projected by the two projectors, and the sound supplied by the tape recorder, interact with one another in subtle and suggestive ways.

The interrelationships between the three information sources in *Kitch's Last Meal* come to imply a pervasive emotional or spiritual dimension behind the events. We can feel how Schneemann's involvement in a web of domestic interrelationships over a period of years came to infuse the various threads of that web with increasing meaning. As the train passes the house day after day, it comes to herald Kitch's inevitable death and, implicitly, to imply the frailty and evanescence of the entire web. As we see Kitch growing obviously ill, and at the end, when we see the jolting, sorrowful images of Schneemann holding the flat, stiff carcass of her dead cat, we realize that the everyday routines captured in the film are, in a basic sense, an illusion: every day of routine is really another transformation, a further ticking away of the limited minutes of the film and of the life it records.

If the sexual explicitness of *Fuses* has caused Schneemann censorship difficulties in some quarters, the choice of double Super-8 projection with taped sound makes screening *Kitch's Last Meal* a challenge of a different sort. Except, perhaps, for a rather limited period during the sixties, and except for a few screening rooms scattered around the country now, there has been little opportunity for a film artist who wants to be creative with the conditions of projection, as well as with the imagery recorded on the celluloid, to see her work screened, much less screened well. In the presentations of *Kitch's Last Meal* I've attended, the most workable projection arrangement has been to set up the projectors and tape recorder within the audience. The use of three separate sources has required a certain amount of testing and adjustment before screenings, as well as breaks during the presentation so that new reels and tapes can be synchronized. Since these difficulties are an almost automatic function of prior aesthetic decisions by Schneemann, her determination to use this unusual method reflects not only a need to live within the economic limitations which plague many film artists, but a serious commitment to the immediacy and potential of the smaller gauge. Ironically, in fact, while Schneemann's own concern that the three sources of imagery be perfectly in sync—"that film is cut like a straitjacket. It's very, very fragile. There can't be six extra frames in all the apparent casualness of it"—makes for screening difficulties, the adjustment of the projectors and tape recorder within the screening space tends to humanize the film technology itself, and, appropriately, to give screenings the feel of a group of friends getting together to show home movies. Fittingly, in other words, a screening of Schneemann's domestic epic tends to create one tenuous web of interrelationships from the experience of exploring a previous one.

Though *Fuses*, *Plumb Line*, and *Kitch's Last Meal* were not conceived as a trilogy, together they demonstrate a consistent and coherent aesthetic challenge to those experiential realities which seem to limit—and thereby diminish—our potential for living authentic and realized lives.[5] *Fuses* challenges societal taboos which would define sex as a minor, short-lived part of a relationship, which would banish if from our sight and our serious considerations, and which would use it to enact sexist definitions of maleness and femaleness; and it presents this challenge in a film form which consistently defies the "rules" established by a film history which, far too often, has labored to make us comfortable with the most restricted forms of human interaction in the simplest, least-demanding film language. *Plumb Line* challenges the potentially debilitating effects of emotional loss by aesthetically converting its filmic remnants into a film form which simultaneously faces facts—in this case the facts of a subtle, but powerful sexist manipulation—and absorbs them into a process of creative metamorphosis. *Kitch's Last Meal* challenges the notion that domestic life is of minor filmic significance. The film's form—its epic length (it's certainly one of the longest serious

films ever made in the small, intimate gauge); the complex interweaving of its three strands; its totemic stacking of one image above another; even its title, which echoes "Custer's Last Stand" and "Krapp's Last Tape"—*is* the artist's confrontation of the inevitability of death. Yes, Schneemann seems to say, what we love most will change and disappear, and often despite the security we may feel around us; but the answer is not to withdraw our love, but to intensify it. If we can't live forever, we must live more sensitively, more deeply, in the time we have.

NOTES

1. Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy*, ed. Bruce McPherson (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, 1979), p. 9.
2. Schneemann made this clear in an interview I conducted with her on November 2, 1979: "I'm a painter, working with my body and ways of thinking about movement and environment that come out of the discipline of having painted for six or eight hours a day for years. That's got to be the root of my language in any medium. I'm not a film-maker. I'm not a photographer. I'm this painter who's working again with extended, related materials. I don't want to feel that as a film-maker I'm competing with people who have defined that one area as their specific and complete focus." The other quotations in this essay are taken from the same interview, which was published in *Millenium Film Journal*, Fall 1980.
3. Schneemann: "In Venice there were all these men following me around and everywhere spires and towers."
4. Schneemann used an old-fashioned step-printer (a device which allows the film-maker to print film a frame at a time) to develop permutations from 8mm film scraps and scrapbook photos which had been recorded during the course of the relationship. The step-printer allowed her to manipulate the movement within the imagery by printing the same frame over and over so that the imagery is still, by printing consecutive frames and creating normal motion, and by re-ordering frames so as to create reverse motion, erratic motion, acceleration and deceleration. She was able to print four separate 8mm frames within a 16mm frame, and to vary the configurations of these frames-within-the-frame by printing the same, or different, images in each of the four quadrants, by "mirror printing" the same image four times so that one half of the 16mm frame is the reverse of the other (this creates a kaleidoscopic effect when the 8mm imagery is moving), by turning 8mm images upside down, and by superimposing more than one image within one or more of the quadrants.
5. *Autobiographical Trilogy* has been mysteriously absent from several recent surveys of augobiographical film-making: Schneemann is not discussed in the autobiography/diary section of the first issue of *Millenium Film Journal* (it includes P. Adams Sitney's long essay, "Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film"); and she was not included in extensive retrospectives of autobiographical film at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1978 and at Anthology Film Archives in summer, 1979, despite the fact that her work predates and is more fully autobiographical than many of the films which were included. Nevertheless, when definitive retrospectives of this genre of avant-garde film are held, and definitive histories are written, Schneemann is sure to have a prominent place.

CHIDANANDA DAS GUPTA

New Directions in Indian Cinema

Indian cinema faces the eighties, indeed the twenty-first century, with a confidence few countries can equal. As a mass medium as well as an art, it is on a continuous upswing. Over 700 features in 16 languages (more than half of them in color) were made in 1979. The equivalent of some $225 million are annually invested in the production sector of what is the tenth largest industry in a fast industrializing country. The all-India film made in Hindi, a language spoken in five states but widely understood in others, is made mostly in Bombay and accounts for about 25% of the total production; the rest is made in 15 regional languages at a relatively low cost. The number of cinemagoers—about 10 million a day—is restricted only by the dearth of cinema theaters (9500), especially in rural areas. A "parallel" cinema with a markedly greater creative energy, arising in the regional languages, has begun to turn sideways and poach into "commercial" territory.

Television, with only a half million or so sets for India's population of more than 600 million, is heavily dependent on film for its programming; in any event, since TV sets are very expensive in terms of Indian incomes, it can have no effect except on a tiny elite for many decades. The field

films ever made in the small, intimate gauge); the complex interweaving of its three strands; its totemic stacking of one image above another; even its title, which echoes "Custer's Last Stand" and "Krapp's Last Tape"—*is* the artist's confrontation of the inevitability of death. Yes, Schneemann seems to say, what we love most will change and disappear, and often despite the security we may feel around us; but the answer is not to withdraw our love, but to intensify it. If we can't live forever, we must live more sensitively, more deeply, in the time we have.

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day for the Indian cinema should thus extend well into a future that, for the present, seems limitless. 2000 A.D. might find us making over a thousand feature films a year for an audience of 20 million a day, or more.

The just-deposed Chief Minister of Tamil Nadua (South India), one of the largest states in the country, is a popular actor of many years standing. Soon after Mr. M.G. Ramachandran (better known as "MGR") took over government, he found himself short of funds for paying his income taxes. With admirable candor, the matinée idol went to the state legislature, stated his reasons, and obtained permission to act in a few films in order to clear his tax dues. So there he was, dressed in red and black (the colors of his party) playing the swashbuckling hero to buxom young women, in between cabinet meetings. To that, Mr. Ronald Reagan could not hold a candle.

And this is not an isolated case; more than a decade ago, the film industry virtually took over the government in this South Indian State. When the DMK party overthrew the Congress party, which had ruled since independence in 1947, nine of the ten members of its first cabinet came from the cinema. The quite open promotion of DMK politics in the cinema for years on end is something that the Congress had ignored at its peril.

At the close of the seventies, India's population is running at an estimated 630 million. Forty percent of this number is considered to be living below the poverty line, and mainly concentrated in the 175,000 villages of the country. There is large-scale unemployment in the cities, and slums abound. In the rural areas, the benefits of independence have not reached many; legislation has initiated the process but not terminated the tyranny of the landowner or the grinding poverty of the landless. In spite of this, an India within India is making enormous strides. In a country of 630 million, even 10% makes 63 million—the size of France. The country has the tenth largest GNP, the third largest scientific workforce, in the world. Agricultural surpluses have yielded food stocks that can fight off successive monsoon failures; industrial production is constantly going up. Exports—mainly of engineering products and know-how—are fast expanding; no consumer goods, including durables, are imported, all demand being met by domestic production. Overseas contracts and Indians working abroad, especially in the Middle East, have hoisted foreign-exchange holdings to $7 billion, despite the need to import a third of our energy. In the commercial world and among the intelligentsia, there is a quiet sense of assurance abroad, in spite of their constant criticism of this governmental action or that and the specter of double-digit inflation.

Imbibing this cream at the top has only hardened the arteries of the mass cinema's social conscience, such as it may have been. The hedonism is complete, and reckless. A third of all the Hindi films of 1978 dealt with the themes of crime and revenge and bear the unmistakable impress of James Bond, complete with electronic gadgetry, nubile females, and high kicks at the villain's chin in slow motion. Traditional values are still adhered to, but the nod at religion is more perfunctory. Sex and violence count for much, and but for a strict censorship, would be rampant. In a word, the mass cinema is more escapist than ever before.

◀ *Commercial cinema: the revenge theme. (Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha in* NATWARLAL.)

The earlier national leadership's Gandhi-Tagore-Nehru vision of a dynamic synthesis of East and West, tradition and modernity, had never touched the masses. The obscurantist values of the *nouveau riche*—a byproduct of industrial development—and the traditional petty trader, have dominated the commercial cinema since independence, but never more than today. If these values have been modified to any extent, it is not due to a conscious philosophy but to unavoidable contact with foreign countries, the use of the artifacts of modern industry, and the spread of technical-managerial, in other words utilitarian, education. Contact with the West and West Asia has become too wide and inescapable to bother any more about the contamination of the soul, or the impurities of food. (Until the early decades of this century, crossing the sea was considered sinful by orthodox Hindus; the shadow of a Muslim on one's plate would still make food impure for those high-caste ones left untouched by change.) Hundreds of thousands of Indians, not only managers and engineers but skilled and unskilled laborers, are working in West Asia, Africa, and South East Asia—wherever Indians are building townships, airports, steel plants, or railways. Globe-trotting is no longer reserved for the elegant business executive or college professor. Many a slum dweller or villager has joined the jet set.

Inevitably, there is greater tolerance of realities. Divorce, the working woman, the unwed mother, even "the other woman" *(Pati, Patni aur Woh)* are not sneered at. City women and Westernized people in general are no longer absolute villains *(Namaskar, Badaltay Rishtay)*. A raped wife may occasionally be welcomed back into the family by an understanding husband *(Ghar)*. A woman can even be an assistant manager in a bank *(Dilsay Milay Dil)* without attracting opprobrium. *Kaliyug* (the evil aeon) has come to be accepted.

It is also evident that this change has been brought about more by new social mobility than by contact with cinema from the West. In spite of ten international film festivals, contact with world cinema is still meager, erratic, and unfruitful as far as the authors of mass cinema are concerned. And the mass audience has been interested in festival films only to the extent of paying a premium, any premium, for films with explicit sex scenes. To the vast mass of office clerks and shop keepers of New Delhi, a film festival, being free from censorship, is synonymous with pornography; the international film festival in 1979 was widely rejected as a "flop" because its sex quotient was below expectations. The film industry's main interest, apart from lending its presence to oblige the government (the festivals are state-organized) is in plagiarizing storylines and gimmicks. Except for Bondian hedonism and thrill-seeking, Western cinema has no influence on the mass film. (India is the one major market Hollywood has never figured how to crack.)

Instead of the earlier West-Is-Bad-East-Is-Good formula, the emerging new pattern relies on revenge. The good man is driven by the evils of society, represented by the villain; sees his parents, brother or sister, or friend humiliated and destroyed; resolves to take revenge. Often, in this noble cause, God comes to his aid as well, besides an altogether handy providence. He turns into a Robin Hood, taking from the rich and giving to the poor—which justifies his violence, gets the audience on his side, and leaves the film-maker free to glorify that violence as means to an end. Perhaps this formula reflects the absence of a social philosophy and hence concerted social action; it is up to the individual to correct social wrongs to the extent he can, for no larger force is going to organize a just society.

Once the original sin or social inaction has been established, the individual's violence is washed clean, and fantasizing about it is fully reconcilable with a high opinion of oneself. This is particularly so since all is done for the sake of the family, which is threatened then reunited in three-fourths of all popular films. Not unnaturally, such justifiable identification with banditry boosts the morale of the have-nots who comprise a large part of the audience, hungry for the goodies and seething with the discontent of being denied. Good luck must be around the corner, and may well depend on a baritone voice and a brash manner. For the illiterate masses, the cinema remains the sole interpreter of the world and its phenomena in the absence of traditional guides who have disappeared or become ineffective, and of new guides which might take their place.

The number of songs in each film has come

down and now averages about four, many popular films getting away with as few as three; but total freedom is still impossible. Occasional efforts at pure narrative such as *Achanak,* whose story about the adultery of a soldier's wife and the husband's return, revenge, and capture was uninterrupted by song and dance numbers, have been well made but unimpressive at the box office. Song and dance interludes must still hold up the narrative, although there is today more of an effort to weave them into the story, as in *Sholay* (1975), a "curry Western" technically as well made as any similar work out of Hollywood, and by no means merely a variety show dressed up with a bandit story. There is also the strategy of integrating the songs by simply making them part of the characters' horseplay and general *joie de vivre.* This was done with some success in *Amar Akbar Anthony,* an improbable tale of a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Christian who turn out to be brothers; the overcoming of communal prejudices and emergence of a deep camaraderie among the three had tremendous appeal, and the film was a landmark in the growth of the "family" theme.

However the songs are worked in, the voices are likely to be those of two sisters, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle—who between them sing some 500 film songs each year. Their reassuring soprano voices are dubbed into scenes with no thought of tonal perspective; no matter how near or distant a character is, the song remains at the same volume—top volume.

Nonetheless, the film songs are written by top writers and composed very expertly. The accompaniment is equally skillful, and the artistry of the whole is the despair (and the model) of film industries in neighboring countries. Songs are the main ingredient of success in a popular film, next to the stars themselves, and if the songs are good, audiences return again and again to a film. Radio, records, and television help in spreading these songs across the country, but in India the cinema is the fountainhead of popular music. One suspects that many popular film-makers today, more assured in their technique and less in need of musical props, would like to go on to straight narrative but are prisoners of the public they once taught to accept music as an essential part of cinema.

Bobby (1973) is a typical example of how the usual song and dance numbers operate. The boy and the girl (Rishi Kapoor and "Dimple") are both young and handsome and innocent-looking enough to be credible as young lovers à la *Love Story;* but every time their innocence becomes convincing after a scene or two, "Dimple" breaks into sexy hipwiggling and breast-shaking. The moment the dance is over, she returns to her demure charm. In Kapoor's own later *Satyam Shivam Sundaram,* the songs are more integrated with the religious aspect which the director sets up as a tension-creating foil to the sexual allure of his underclad heroine (Zinnat Aman). But the film failed at the box office, perhaps because of its excessive dependence on the female body at the expense of all else and its overplaying of the de Millian religion-cum-sex card.

One factor which remains common to the bandit film, the "social" film, the mythological, or whatever, is the minimal role usually played by the director. Guru Dutt was one director who had created something of a personal cinema within the commercial format, but his performance in the fifties and early sixties has not been repeated. The success or failure of a film today depends on the stars and the music director and sometimes the scripwriter, rather than the director, who is more akin to a technical manager of the enterprise. The star, in fact, is more central to the film than all the others, because the subject and the writer are subservient to him. It is Amitabh Bachchan who made the revenge film a success by playing the lead role in as many as 18 such films, all of which were successful. Each successive film on the subject is a refinement of the earlier one; it is as if the same film is being made again and again and perfected in the process. Any gimmick which works in one is repeated in the next; the ones that don't click are dropped. The music director directs what is called "the picturization of songs"; the fight director directs fight scenes and chases; the dance director directs the dance numbers; the dialogue is actually directed by the stars who often rewrite them, expertly, on the spot—they know what kind of dialogue will be effective for them. Ways of shooting scenes are, more often than not, set ways. All this leaves little room for the director. One thing that he does *not* do is control all aspects

of the making of the film. He is more completely a non-*auteur* of the work than any hack Hollywood director ever was, and even the director of a highly successful film does not thereby earn more creative freedom in making his next.

Thus "progress" in the main body of the commercial cinema can be illusory. Its subjects today are a little less orthodox and its technical level has improved a great deal. But its creativity remains in doubt. It is the total impersonality of the film-making process which makes Indian cinema so radically different from the films of the West. Despite its long history and immense size the Indian cinema has consistently failed to create artistically valid works within the commerical format. This has led to an altogether artificial polarity between the "commercial" film and the "art" film.

Westerns by Wellman or Wyler or Ford had individuality within genre conventions. If Ford had made *High Noon,* it would have been strikingly different from Zinnemann's film. No such distinctions mark off *Sholay* from other Indian revenge films.

When, Satyajit Ray came out with *Pather Panchali* in 1955, its revolt against the current commercial cinema could not have been more complete. It was shot entirely on location on a very low budget, with unglamorous nonprofessionals, without a trace of sexual love interest, indeed almost without a story. It used Indian music on the sound track, and the only song in it was sung incomplete in the broken voice of a decrepit old woman. It was a film of deep compassion about a group of poor people, seen as individual human beings. It was completely regional, taking place at a specific time and place. It was also intensely personal and all the aspects of film-making were firmly in the hands of the director. Each one of these things broke a rule of the film establishment of the time.

Naturally, Ray remains the father figure of the counterforce against the commerical cinema in India. But over the years, he has tried his hand at many things in many ways and the perceptions of his admirers and followers have also changed to some extent. In the years since *Charulata* (1964) there has been a certain amount of discontent with Ray's remoteness from the "burning issues," which caused a turn first to Ritwik Ghatak and then, to a lesser extent, to Mrinal Sen, for a more forthright anti-establishment focus. Particularly in *Pratidwandwi* (*The Adversary,* 1970) and *Jana Aranya* (*The Middleman,* 1975), Ray came close to grappling with "the burning issues." Even so, the feeling persisted among many that here was a great film-maker, who represented a previous era dominated by the ideas of Rabindranath Tagore, looking at contemporary reality rather from the outside, bemoaning the fading away of earlier, perhaps nobler, values ineffective in the post-independence world of harsh reality, plagued by unemployment and riddled with corruption. Ray's extraordinary ability to lift a problem out of its national confines onto a universal level tends to leave some dissatisfied. His role as a chronicler of change in an ancient country slowly but inexorably moving into the modern world does not attract as many as forcefully as it once did. *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder,* 1973) was considered by many to be too "beautiful" to suggest the menace of famine. His perception of the stark contrast between the lush green beauty of nature and the grey specter of a man-made famine was lost on many who ached to see a stronger and more direct treatment of such themes. *Shatranj-ke-khilari* (*The Chessmen,* 1978) is perhaps his most exquisite and most deeply felt film since *Charulata,* as much in the breadth of its intellectual perception and its fine sense of irony as in the sensitivity of its detail and its insights into moments when the personal and the historical meet. Yet it must be counted as one of Ray's least understood films, among the wider audience as well as younger film-

Satyajit Ray's SHATRANJ-KE-KHILARI ▶

makers and film buffs. The time may come when these films will be re-viewed in tranquillity, and rediscovered. Right now, there appears to be a sense of hurry about the proceedings, an impatience to get on with it, and to get there faster, along a different route.

Yet the "creative" cinema as opposed to the "commercial"—however artificial such a polarity may seem—still defines itself in Ray's terms. For 25 years, it has stood in opposition to everything the commercial cinema represents. It remains predominantly a cinema of social conscience. Its style is cast in the realist-narrative mold and much of it explores the effects of rapid change in the body of a tradition-ridden society. In its awareness of the best of Western cinema, its avoidance of song and dance routines, glamor and overblown instrumental music, and in the slow rhythm of many of its films, it stays close to the original inspiration provided by Ray.

The new cinema rejects the smug self-satisfaction of an affluence that feeds the overwhelming majority on a diet of dreams, and leaves some 40 percent below the poverty line. Films like Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* or *Nishant,* B.V. Karanth's *Chomana Dudi,* Mrinal Sen's *Oka Oorie Katha* or *Parasuram* refuse to allow the beneficiaries of the new-found affluence to forget the rest of the country. They seek out the problem areas—whether caste or communal problems, landlordism, economic disparity, poverty or superstition, the rights of women or child abuse. It is a cinema that dearly loves to prick the affluent minority's balloon of self-esteem and reveal the stark truth about India. At the same time, it has a sense of concern for the individual human being, and does not deal with him as an abstraction.

Basically, this cinema is regional in character. It stresses the individual traits of an area rather than superficial similarities brought about by the advent of industry and modern communication. The hero may wear regional clothes without being an object of ridicule. But its language limits its market, and it can make an all-India reputation only as "art." (In using the word "regional," one must make an exception in the case of the Tamil and Telegu films which are almost as "big" and as given to unrealistic extravagance as the Hindi.)

Although Hindi is a nearly all-India language as far as the cinema is concerned, oddly enough the creative cinema in Bombay heightens regional characteristics in language, dress, names, and manners as much or more than films actually made in Gujerat or Assam, Orissa or Andhra. So "regionalism" belongs as much to the country of the mind as to geographical origin. Shyam Benegal's or Basu Chatterjee's films are as regional as Bengali films even though they are made in Bombay within the ambit of the commercial cinema. Regional cinema tends to be creative; creative cinema tends to be regional.

In the fifties and sixties, there was hardly any creative cinema outside Bengal. In Bombay, Bimal Roy and later Hrishikesh Mukherjee made above the average films by transferring the values of standard Bengali cinema into Hindi, but omitting the vulgarity and exaggeration of the usual commercial Hindi film. It was towards the end of the sixties that the focus of good film-making shifted, first to Bombay, then to the South.

The green signal came in 1969 with the sanction of a small unsecured loan by the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) of the Government of India, to Mrinal Sen for making his *Bhuban Shome,* named after an uptight railway official out on a bird-shooting holiday. Although far from being a masterpiece, the film had a freshness and *joie de vivre,* a vigorous technique (inspired somewhat by the French *nouvelle vague*) and a sense of humor which enchanted the wide audience it was able to reach in Hindi. The self-righteous bigwig of the fourth largest railway system in the world is brought down to earth through his encounter with village realities and the charming young wife of one of his corrupt employees, played by newcomer Suhasini

BHUBAN SHOME: *Uptal Dutt the uptight railway official dons country garb to fool the birds.* ▶

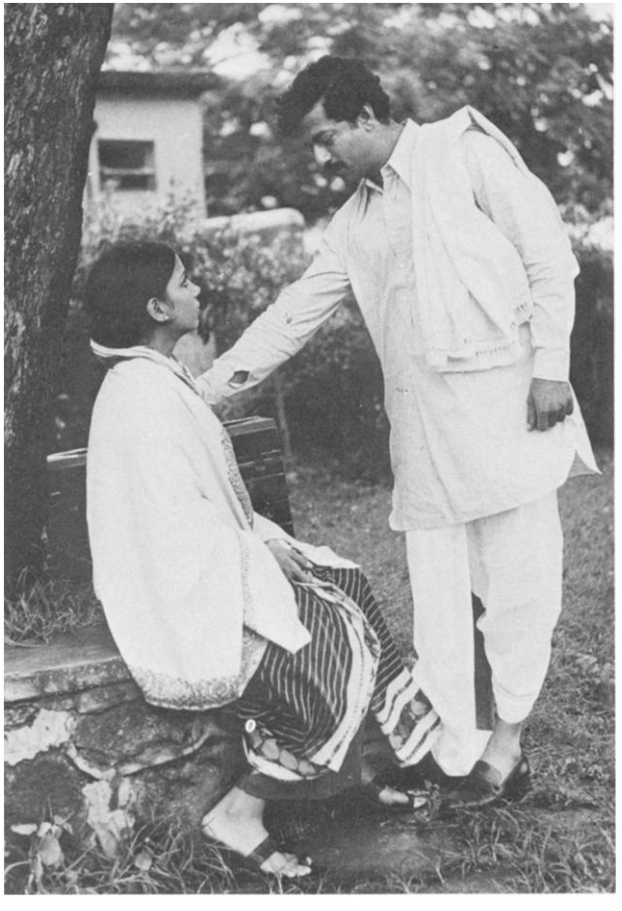
GARM HAWA. *Photo: Hindi Film Project, UC Berkeley*

Mulay. The success of *Bhuban Shome* caused something of a stir among the large middle-class Hindi-speaking audience starved of intelligent cinema by a film industry that aims at the lowest common denominators of taste.

The success of *Bhuban Shome* also encouraged the FFC to finance a large number of film-makers, many of them making their first film. A spate of new films resulted, notably M.S. Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* (*Hot Wind,* 1974), a vivid glimpse into the life of the large Muslim minority of India. A sensitive and courageous work on a highly controversial subject, the film had some initial difficulty in obtaining national exhibition. Being compassionate and realistic but nonpartisan, it left the larger sections of both communities dissatisfied; but more perceptive audiences responded to it warmly. The fears and frustrations of the Muslims, who had ruled the subcontinent for 500 years but were reduced, with the departure of the British, to a large island surrounded by an ocean of Hindus, was brought out poignantly. According to Satyajit Ray, it is one of the two worthwhile films to come out of the "new wave" in Bombay. The second, *Ankur* (*The Seedling,* 1974) was made by Shyam Benegal, who turned to his first feature after an elegant apprenticeship in advertising and documentary films. Stylistically, *Ankur* owes rather more to Ray than *Garm Hawa;* its glow an even rhythm, its understatement, its shying away from the direct sexual encounter which is central to its story, are reminiscent of Ray. It is a polished piece of work, meticulously structured, directed with assurance and acted superbly by the newcomers Shabana Azmi (now a household word) and Anant Nag. The theme of the tyrant landowner who takes advantage of his women employees reappears later in more thundering tones in *Nishant (Night's End,* 1975). Although not financed by the FFC, Benegal's first film belongs in its impulse to the new wave brought about by the intervention of governmental finance.

From *Nishant* on, Benegal places action sequences in the center of his scheme and approaches them head-on. The social commitment is directly expressed. Unlike Ray, Benegal takes sides, and his characters are sharply divided between the oppressor and the oppressed. At the same time, he does not have a simplistic faith in the efficacy of revolutions. *Nishant* surges towards revolt against oppression but ends in misgivings, *Manthan* (*The Churning,* 1976)'s overt defeat for the reformer is underscored with hope; the actress of *Bhumika* (*The Role,* 1977) shuttles between an assertion of her freedom and need for dependence on a man; the dogman of *Kondura* (*The Boon,* 1977) is torn by doubt about the truth of his visions. Benegal's accent on confrontations and the apparent simplicity of his resolutions has made it easier for him to get close to the mass audience, particularly in *Junoon* (*A Flight of Pigeons,* 1978) a Ruskin Bond story of the 1857 mutiny against the British, produced by one of the foremost stars of the Hindi cinema, Shashi Kapoor. The period and the locale are close to those in Ray's *Shatranj,* but the treatment could not be more different. Making an expensive all-India film for the first time, Ray retains the same delicate and personal style, rich with nuances, as in his low-budget Bengali films; Benegal cuts his ambiguities and goes for the drama and the action, with a flourish, but on one level.

No less individual is the work of Basu Chatterjee whose *Sara Akash (The Entire Sky,* 1969) was financed by the FFC and dealt with the subject of alienation between husband and wife. Visually rich, with its fine compositions and eye for locale, the film showed no promise of the wit and lightness of touch and shrewdness of observation which emerged later in this director's enormous output. Chatterjee's instant success with the Hindi-speaking intelligentsia, large enough to make a profit for his low-cost films, attracted the attention of commercial cinema finance sources with his *Rajanigandha (The Lily).* The audience was delighted to recognize itself in the unpretentious hero in



Basu Chatterjee's SWAMI

familiar but amusing situations. Chatterjee's work does not extend beyond this and lays no claim to high seriousness, but his popularity, earned without altogether surrendering his individual character, suggests a new and welcome orientation in the mass cinema.

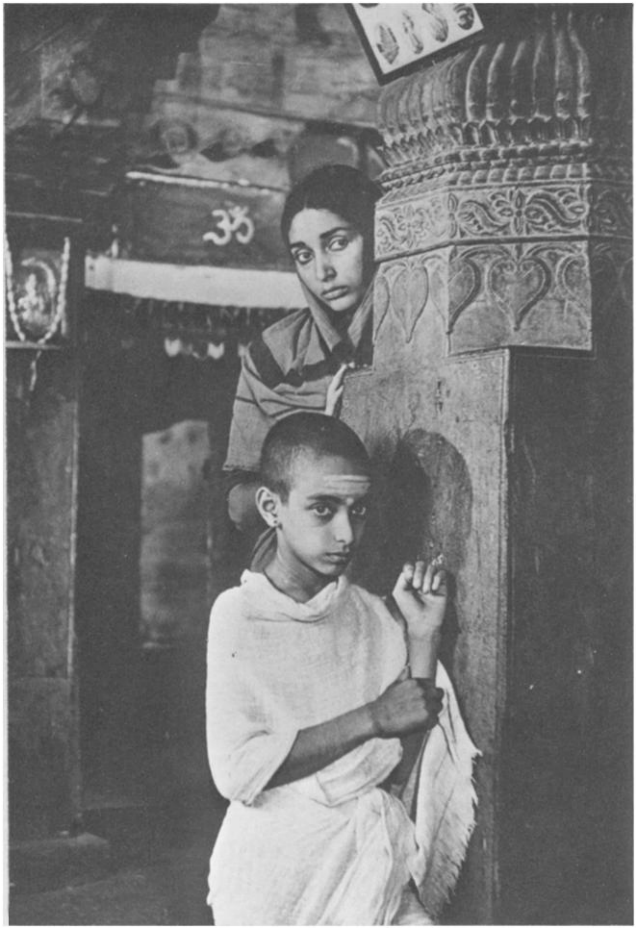
Of the other products of FFC's munificence, a strand was represented by Mani Kaul and Kumar Sahni whose entire output of four films failed to obtain release in any theater circuit. Both graduates of the government's Film Institute in Poona and both under the spell of Robert Bresson, they could not be further removed from Benegal, Chatterjee, or Sathyu. Mani Kaul's long silences in *Uski Roti* (*Daily Bread,* 1970) are sustained by memorable imagery and communicate some inner tension but call for a degree of participation that only the most committed audiences can provide. After about 20 minutes, the interest of *Ashad Ka Ek Din* (*A July Day,* 1972)'s classicism turns into a self-indulgent *tour de force;* the vivid color and sound of *Duvidha* (*Dilemma,* 1973)'s dream hovers strangely between interiority and the tourist poster. Kumar sahni's *Maya Darpan* (*Magic Mirror,* 1972) is similar to Kaul's work in its search for inner tension expressed in a non-narrative style with vivid images and dialogue rendered without modulation. The two directors' initial output perhaps represents a direct outcome of the film buff's exposure to world cinema, Indian in content but alien in style, personal to the extent of rejecting the audience.

The new wave in Bombay thus took two opposite paths. One began well within the forms of the new cinema developed in Bengal in the fifties and sixties but travelled towards a superior commercial cinema. The other reacted against the norms of commercial cinema with an extreme and somewhat pretentious personalization.

It is in the South that one finds more of a continuity with the early trends set in Bengal. In the communist-run, highly literate Southeastern state of Kerala, and also in its neighbor Karnataka, film-makers have consistently paid attention to problems of poverty, ignorance, and superstition. *Chemmeen* (1965), by Ramu Kariat in Kerala, is usually cited as the first notable creative film in the South, but it did not go much further than surface realism in recounting a famous novel on fisherfolk. It was with Pattabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara* (1970) that the first powerful cinematic statement was made in the Southern cinema. The problem posed in its stark visuals is not of the struggle of tradition with modernity but of the inner dilemmas of Brahmin conservatism in a small village, which could have occurred a thousand years ago. Its tightly structured script and its remarkable close-ups of ageless Brahmin faces arise from within a strong Indian identity, rediscovered with conviction. Girish Karnad's performance epitomises Ray's classic description of Eastern expression: "Calm without: fire within." In awakening to its identity, the Southern Film accentuates tradition and village life, achieving a natural rhythm and universality in the process. Karnad's own *Kaadu* (*The Forest,* 1973) and *Vamsa Vriksha* (*The Geneological Tree,* 1971) are rather more dramatic than cinematic, his tech-

nical liberation coming more in *Godhuli (The Cow-Dust Hour,* 1977, co-directed with B.V. Karanth) and particularly in *Ondanondu Kalladalli* (*Once Upon a Time,* 1978), a fascinating homage to Kurosawa. Karnad makes remarkable use of nearly lost traditions in Indian martial arts to provide a perfect correlative to *Seven Samurai's* ronins on the rampage.

Karanth, who co-directed *Godhuli* (a rather awkward attempt at confrontation of East and West at a grassroots level) with Karnad, had earlier made a starkly powerful film, *Chomana Dudi* (*Choma's Drum,* 1975). The image of the landless laborer, sickened by everything in his life, playing the drum as though it invokes some cosmic doomsday, is unforgettable. So are the structure, mood and atmosphere of the first film by young Girish Kasaravalli, another graduate of the Poona Institute, *Ghatashraddha* (*Funeral Rites,* 1977). The film deals starkly with a traditional practice, in its area, of performing death rites for a living person who comes into conflict with the rigorous prescriptions of an orthodox society. The woman in this film, a widow since childhood, commits grievous sin by falling for the village teacher and getting pregnant. She is turned promptly into a non-person and condemned to a living death outside the village. The practice itself has become rare today, but the exorcism of its ghost is a part of the general process of cleansing modern India of an accumulated load of superstition.



◀ *Meena Kutappa as the widow in Girish Kasaravalli's* GHATASRHADDHA

Poverty, caste, tradition, the village—these are the stuff of Kannada cinema. India has many ghosts to exorcise, and nowhere has its cinema sought to do so more than in Karnataka.

The Brahmin problem does not exercise minds as much in Kerala (where the Muslim and Christian populations constitute 40 percent of the total). But tradition does. In M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Nirmalyam* (*The Offering,* 1973) the village oracle's services are no longer required by society; he is kept from starvation only by the munificence of his wife's lover, and chooses death by his own hand in the presence of the goddess who gives him his powers, in one final performance of his dance. This dramatic climax is made memorable by the intense, entranced performance of the actor Anthony. The rest of the film has a slightly theatrical-literary ring and the cinematic realization is rather uneven. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, graduate of the Poona Film Institute and film-club enthusiast, is more at home in cinema if less inclined towards heights of intensity. His two films, *Swayamvaram* (*Own Choice,* 1972) and *Kodiyettam* (*Ascent,* 1977) have the unobtrusive charm of fascinated observation, free of self-conscious structuring or search for social meaning. Yet neither the unusual marriage by choice which ends in defeat in *Swayamvaram* nor the drifter's awakening to responsibility in *Kodiyettam* are without structure or meaning. In the gentle, slow rhythm of his films and their often wordless lyricism, Gopalakrishnan reminds one of Ray. Wordless observation is also the forte of G. Aravindan's *Thampu* (*The Tent,* 1978) but by pushing the realism to its logical, unstructured, conclusion, the director makes his

fascinating style somewhat untenable for a full-length feature.

The new cinema in Karnataka and Kerala is similar to the earlier Bengal "wave" in more ways than one. In its preoccupation with village traditioni, there is the same renewed sense of identity with the people, a deliberate denial of the cultural-economic gulf that separates the city intellectual with a western style education from the rural and the traditional. There is also a faith in humanity and in the future of the country underlying the exploration of tradition and the exposure of social evils. The awareness of massive poverty and the sense of guilt arising from it give the films a moral outlook. In Bengal, this slowly gave way to cynicism and despair and a return to weak escapist routine; the best of southern cinema may avoid that fate for an unusual economic reasons, the continued liberal subsidy from state governments for good cinema that has won them national and international glory. The relative commercial success of the low-budget film has brought augmented state support, tax concessions, and large monetary rewards.

In spite of the brief promise held out by the powerful if literary work of writer D. Jayakantan more than a decade ago (*Unnaipol Oruvan*, 1966), the Tamil cinema has failed to throw up any major talent or movement outside of the commercial cinema whose mores, if anything, are worse than those of Bombay. With taxes rationalized by a film actor chief minister, the commercial cinema is burgeoning, its success preventing the emergence of any counterforce. In the remaining South Indian language of Telegu, the only notable work, in spite of governmental incentives, has been that of outsiders Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal. Sen's *Oka Oorie Katha* has the starkness of *Chomana Dudi* (both feature the same remarkable actor, Vasudev Rao) shot with a rich humor and com-

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plexity of character which lifts this film above the posterish simplicity of some of Sen's other works. Benegal's film has a more evocative atmosphere and a simpler flow of events than usual with this meticulous if sometimes over-structured director.

Altogether, the mantle of the new cinema movement pioneered by Bengal appears to have fallen on the South rather than on Bombay. There are signs that it will outgrow the present easily universalized preoccupation with tradition and village life with their natural unity and rhythm. It will be interesting to see how it copes with more urban problems and their complex interactions with rural life, and captures the dissonances and disjunctions arising from them. In spite of the rural bias, there is already a rich variety of styles and talents, a sense of a new, rising cinema absorbed in its problems but imbued with faith and hope.

Will the polarity between the creative and the commercial cinema, still very marked, give way to a more continuous range? The films of Basu Chatterjee and lately of Benegal (even Karnataka's Karnad with *Ondanondu Kalladalli*) are steps towards creativity within the parameters of the all-India box office. With an assured economic future before it, with talent and resources expanding, Indian cinema may one day arrive at its "golden age"—producing a welter of films some of which will, in various degrees, combine creativity with commerce, and open up the entire spectrum from the most personal art to the most passive spectacle that now dominates its larger dimensions.

Reviews

THE SPACE MOVIE

Director/Screenwriter/Editor: Tony Palmer. Music ("The Space Symphony"): Mike Oldfield.

The Space Movie (one of the 1980 Filmex offerings I attended with greatest anticipation) identifies itself right from the beginning: Ten years ago, man first landed on the moon, and this film is a celebration of that achievement. This review will examine the perverse way in which the film celebrates the lunar defloration.

Put together from NASA and National Archive footage, the film creates a meaning for the moon landing by focusing primarily on three elements. Above all, it is fascinated with thrust. Second, the film is interested in the men who bring it off. Third, the film's reconstruction of this piece of history involves the beauty of the moon shot and of space itself.

The narration sets these primary elements in the context of our early "space defeats" by the Russians. After some comments by Werner Von Braun (the "German American scientist"), we get a history of space exploration from 1961 forward, where video images and headlines in various languages chronicle Russia's initial successes, with the refrain: "And the United States sent its congratulations." The voice-over tells how the US put forth a mighty effort to land the first manned capsule on the moon so as to win the competition for world prestige, rather than for any intrinsic or even any other instrumental values. In other words, we undertook this mission to promote our national potency in the space face-off.

In this context, it is not surprising that, above all, the film celebrates the enormous, upright rocket and its straining for climactic release from the earth's gravity. Much of its screen time is occupied by images of the huge projectile being worked on, supported by its scaffolding, poised in readiness to explode upward, and finally doing so ever so slowly, ever so powerfully, moving up, up, up, and in, in, in, as it penetrates the heavens ever further, thrust upward by its unthinkable power—"Eleven million, seven hundred thousand pounds of thrust," the voice-over tells us proudly. "Your thrust is lookin' good," say the guys in Houston. As the highly derivative and predictable music moves toward cosmic climax yet one more time, the rocket's endless explosion leaves a fiery trail across the cosmos—what spews out of the rocket is plentiful and hot! As if to reiterate the importance of this imagery, the film returns to it after the final credits begin, giving us a close-up of the jets, iden-

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tifying them as the round repositories of the awesome and powerful juice that will get this huge thing up and off. And after they land, the astronauts penetrate the moon's virgin surface with a good ol' American flagpole.

Through one particular group of images, the film inadvertently opens a contradiction in its own attitude toward the thrust material. As astronauts get out of a helicopter that has picked them up from the sea, many of the military men in formation on the aircraft carrier take out and light up a battery of long, fat cigars. A moment later, the heroes are greeted by another man who removes his hat to reveal a smooth head and thick, pink, vaguely tumescent neck, himself an icon so explicit as to be inescapably comical, thus subverting the film's dominant imagery.

The film is endlessly interested in the world's best thrusting team—the three astronauts and the hundreds of technicians in NASA jumpsuits at their consoles in Houston. True to familiar mythology about gen-u-wine American accomplishment, we see the childlike playfulness of the astronauts. These are good American boys; there is no hint of a sophisticated, resonant response to their extraordinary experiences. Over and over again, the men are shown playing around in the gravity-free experimental chambers in the capsule, and on the surface of the moon itself (leaving eternal footprints as well as residual hardware). While this is joyful and enviable (I wish I could do it, too), it is rather unsatisfying as ritual celebration when the astronauts run around in speeded-up motion, singing, "I was strolling on the moon one day, in the merry merry month of—December—no, May," while the guys in Houston slap their thighs. Following liftoff for the return, the boys recite: "Home again, home again, jiggedy jig." At one point, they use a children's story to reveal their true contempt for women's work and homosexuality as one of them minces around, lisping: "Say? Who's been tracking up my lunar surface?" Not only did one of the astronauts say it, but the film-maker chose it. The film insists that this peak experience of human history consistently evokes the language of clichés and children's chants, as if nothing further along in the astronauts' experience or in the culture could offer more highly developed or complex discourse for the occasion. (Or perhaps neither film-maker nor astronauts could bear to reveal that they are deeply moved?)

But this discourse reflects, not the "natural" American response, as the British-made film would imply, but a series of choices that demean the moon shot and the individuals who accomplished it. Perhaps dimly aware that "Aw, shucks" and baby talk aren't quite enough, the film-maker attempts to lend dignity by including that impenetrable epithet: "One small step for man. One giant leap for mankind." From seeing this film, you would never dream that the films and tapes of the moon landing offer a great range of fascinating material. Norman Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon* reveals the astronauts' ability to report their unique experiences in evocative detail: "The surface is fine and powdery. I can . . . pick it up loosely with my toes . . . It does adhere in fine layers like powdered charcoal to the sole and sides of my boots. I only go in a small fraction of an inch . . . I can see the footprints of my boots and the treads in the fine sand particles." They can also locate a vocabulary appropriate to their mature responses: "A unique, almost mystical environment," says one; "Magnificent desolation," says another. So it's the film, not the astronauts, that's puerile.

Given the film's reductive obsession with good ol' boys and their thrusting power, it is no surprise that women are almost completely absent in this celebration of phallic hegemony. Women appear twice in this film, and twice only: once in the brief images of spectators watching liftoff from thousands of yards away, and again in the sequence where one or two women are seen assembling and sewing together parts of the uniforms to be worn by the journeying heroes. Perfect! Betsy and Penelope, do your stuff!

There is some suggestion of "the female" in certain images such as the roundness of the heavenly bodies and of the huge, delicate saucers that receive messages from the space machines; shocking is the explicit vaginality of the rubber trash receiver in the capsule. (Several other fellas had to help the astronauts ease into the opening slit of the capsule in the first place.) I remark on these images, not to promulgate an essentialist female iconography, but simply because it was such a pleasure (however ironic) to see them upon their rare appearance. They provide the only relief from one of the most explicit and relentless exclusions

it has ever been my lot to experience.

The third of the film's preoccupations in telling us what the moon shot means is the fascinating imagery of what I take to be fuel debris, falling away in bright, flaky explosions and streams; also included are long shots of the exhaust streams of other rockets, the explosions of stages being ejected, and other shots of various kinds of beautiful exhaust and residue. I was ironically reminded of Dylan Thomas's lines in "Fern Hill" about blossoms falling into the "rivers of the windfall light." The inclusion of these beauty shots, borrowing techniques from abstract or "underground" filmmaking, romanticizes into a technological pastoral of our time what is actually a consumption of fuel, money, effort, and every other natural and human resource on a scale so huge that we, with our little four-cylinder imports, can hardly grasp it. When we see the tractor that moves the moon rocket into place, it is so big that, despite its being examined from several angles, we can hardly tell what it is. The waste products of competition and massive consumption, the film tells us, can be abstracted into a beauty so mysteriously thrilling as to obscure their material causes.

However, the film gives us too little of another kind of mysterious beauty. As in the representation of the astronauts, the visual choices omit the very material that might justify the effort being chronicled. Every once in a while, we get a shot from the capsule looking back at the green and blue, cloud-draped globe of the earth, or part of the circle of the moon. The images of the black sky and silver-beige moon as the capsule approaches are some of the best in the film. But almost immediately, we cut back to shots of the rocket, or of the men in the capsule. In other words, we get very little sense of true exploration because we're hardly ever allowed to see what's out there. The astronauts are at least willing to acknowledge their curiosity about the unknown, a motive that surely influenced our development of space capabilities, but which seems to have little influence on the film-maker's choices. The astronauts tell Houston: "All three of us are plastered to the windows lookin'." We wish we were too. They report their amazement at being able to see the entire western hemisphere. "Gee, I guess it would be great," say we in the audience wistfully; is the film-maker excluding us because we haven't got "the right stuff" to be there ourselves?

But as the capsule moves closer to the surface of the moon, the razzle dazzle of fast cutting and Zarathustran music (the whole film gives you the sense of history imitating Kubrick badly) is briefly replaced by a steady gaze at the moon's surface. We realize that the reason for this shift to a more satisfying, careful observation is so that we can see the exact moment of contact with the surface. I guess that's what's being celebrated: "The eagle has landed." The footage that follows is excellent, showing the craters and ridges, their outlines softened by a thick, dully glowing glaze of hitherto undisturbed dust. But even here, the romantic mystifying of these images dominates the visual impulse, as we get no reference for scale or direction. A little later, the camera pulls back to show a tiny person against the large, smooth, and inviting hills.

However, the finale, involving unidentifiable but truly exciting images of planets, space machines, perhaps burning gas clouds leaping off the surface of the sun, and possibly a meteor storm, returns to the style of mystifying and fragmenting the images. The techniques of experimental films are used primarily to sentimentalize (we see a glowing sunset reflected in the fat, brass bell of a tuba) or to obscure.

I believe that the attitude of many people toward the footage gathered through space exploration is this: "Leave it alone and let us look at it. It holds little for us as plain citizens except the opportunity to look, learn, and imagine. We have the *right* to look at it closely, just as you do." But that opportunity is very rare. Occasionally, institutions such as museums of natural history will screen several hours of unaltered footage. But if you think about it, you realize how hard it is to see good images of space: newspaper pictures are black and white and made of coarse dots; television has such poor resolution; many magazines have increasingly poor stock and color reproduction; and a feature film like this one insists on being about getting there, rather than about where it is we got for the first time in human history. It's enough to make you wish for the *Whole Earth* cover, or even the shiny glories of old *Life* magazine.

Finally, we must remind ourselves that despite

the implication that this is a two-man film, its financing and support superstructure are extremely complex. The shots of all the guys in their NASA outfits and the interplay of government, science, army, and private sector watching, participating in, and filming this effort creates the illusion that the whole project was undertaken by a group of highly skilled volunteer ex-boyscouts or lodge-members, involving no ulterior motives and making money for no one. This footage, the credits proudly tell us, was filmed by more than 50 cameramen and hardware devices over a period of 17 years. How did English producers Richard Branson and Simon Draper get it? In the Defense Department in Washington is an office where you can take a script or other description of a film project for "approval." With that approval, you can go to the National Archive or NASA, look at the available footage, and choose what you want. Then, for reprinting costs only, you can get a copy of it. (Without that approval, I guess you can go home.) Thus these film-makers walked off with a budget of untold billions of dollars, a 20-year shooting schedule, and a technical staff that daily invented the state of the art. And guess who paid for it.

Thus the film's ambiance obscures its true costs. It celebrates one of the greediest omnivores in the entire social program. The relations between the sexes are expressed through monolithic male dominance and through the phallic signification of almost all the objects and symbols that are created or deemed worthy of attention by these spacemen and film-makers. It celebrates the imperialist habit, extending competition and the adversary stance into yet another important new realm of human activity. As discourse on space exploration, the film mistakes its true object of attention, translating profound experience into shallow accomplishment, and ultimately frustrating our desire to share one of the most exciting visual journeys of all time. —BEVERLE HOUSTON

ANGI VERA

The new Hungarian film *Angi Vera* is unusual—a fine political film that is simultaneously sensitive to psychological nuance. Written and directed by Pal Gabor, the film centers on the complex and elusive character of a luminously beautiful young woman of working-class origins, Vera Angi. (In Hungarian, last names precede first names.) Set in 1948 when the Communist Party had begun to consolidate its power, the film opens with Vera stepping out of her quiet anonymity at a meeting, by making an outspoken critique of the hospital's chief of staff. She is embraced for it by the Party, which sees her as the new blood it needs. The film then follows her through a three-month training program for aspiring party functionaries and for veterans who need to be resocialized; and it concludes with the promise of a grand future for her in the Party.

The hospital-meeting scene establishes from the outset the special character of the film: it circles continually around the face and bold actions of Vera (Veronika Papp), but her motivation remains ambiguous, with the widest range of possible explanations projected. Though tearful, stammering, and innocent-looking, Vera boldly attacks the hospital chief as a patronizing bourgeois who abuses patients and workers. Does she do so out of class resentment? moral integrity and purity? sheer opportunism? or a combination of all three together? Gabor leaves it open-ended and the scene sets the film's tone—a refusal to settle for the single note, a rejection of stereotype, a fidelity to human complication.

The hospital-meeting scene also introduces us to the other prime element in the film: the all-pervasive power of the Stalinist Party. The Party's drab rhetoric promises a new world, but its leadership is usually seen in long shot, sitting on a stage in a vast room, with the members standing or sitting like dwarfed, frightened supplicants below them. The leaders are stiff bureaucrats like the squeaky-voiced Sas, or seamless arrogant careerists who seemingly have never suffered a day for the revolution. It's a party that instills fear and demands conformity from its membership, proper behavior being more significant than knowledge of Marxist theory or examples of heroic action. However, Gabor does not turn this critique of the Stalinist Party into a denunciation of Communism. The most sympathetic figures in the film are Marxists and there is an implicit affirmation of the revolutionary past before it was transformed into sectarianism and careerism, and its human face erased.

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The film's vision of the Party is reflected in the complex relationships between Vera and two veteran women Communists as well as in her romantic involvement with her young, vulnerable teacher. Only eighteen and motherless, Vera Angi is drawn to the two women for protection and definition, but the two have antipathetic personalities and adhere to very different notions of being a good Communist. Maria Muskat (Eva Szabo) is an earthy, vital non-conformist given to rough, sexual humor, and though she has heroically served the cause, she is unwilling to submerge her voice, appetites, and impulses to the dictates of the Party. Vera's other mentor, Anna Trajan (Erzai Pasztor), has also courageously worked for the cause during World War II, but is much less sympathetic—repressed, unforgiving, unattractively middle-aged. She dutifully and unquestioningly serves the Party, and has been so shaped by self-denial that she judges everyone by an inhumanly stern set of standards.

Vera's deepest tie is to Anna, in whose shadow she walks, like an attentive daughter—or a lackey. The nature of the bond is again open to multiple renderings, from the most right- or wrong-minded idealism to gross self-interest. Anna Trajan perhaps mirrors Vera's own moral severity, and she is a much more controlling and maternal-looking figure than Maria. She also holds out the promise of future success: Anna is next in line for the powerful position of editor-in-chief of the Party newspaper. Gabor constructs one strong scene which reveals the full depth of Anna's dogmatism and Vera's passive but conscious compliance with her. The women have a chance encounter with a sympathetic old democratic socialist, who rages against his factory boss as a former fascist. Afterward Anna draws up a document for Vera to sign denouncing the unemployed worker as an enemy of the state—and the full light on Vera's profile, and the sharp surprised turn of her face toward Anna, indicate the girl's full understanding of the collaboration she is consenting to. It is a quietly shocking moment which firmly sets Vera's future course.

Vera's other prime relationship, with her married teacher Istvan (Tasa Dunai), is another instance of the film's depiction of the defeat of the human, as well as another example of the ambiguous nature of Vera's character. Istvan is a committed Communist and a gentle, humane, and dreamy-looking man. Gabor beautifully captures the mix of seriousness and fragility which shades into a kind of mute ineffectuality—as Vera draws him to her with longing looks, naive student questions, and finally a direct proposal. Vera's actions open up a vein of desperate emotion in Istvan, treated by Gabor as a lust for beauty (Istvan's wife is plain). The theme is echoed in the attractive burly figure of a miner who also adores Vera and her delicate beauty and regrets his own marriage. But Gabor also means this desire to be perceived as a compensation for something larger than dreary marriages. Against the drab, gray, institutional setting of the camp, and the stilted, sterile jargon of the Party with its impersonal loudspeakers, Vera offers the aesthetic and sensual pleasure that the State and Party negate and neglect. In fact, Gabor often frames Vera in rich, warm colors, with a striking use of light and shadow—contrasting vividly with the damp mist that envelops the camp. And the other characters, grey lumps in their clumsy coats and shoes at institutional meetings, are sensual and beautiful when we see them in an early shot of women showering together, naked, laughing, singing, and taking pleasure.

Vera as careerist, with mentor Anna

Training his camera on faces and eyes, in a series of close-ups and reaction shots evoking watchfulness, uneasiness, comraderie, Gabor creates relationships and a heroine which defy schematization. Vera does manipulate Istvan, and the director treats her as having a thicker, more protected woman's psyche, and the man as the weaker, almost crazed with the agony of his passion. Yet despite Vera's rejection, at the camp's climactic self-criticism session, of Istvan's avowal

of love, her affair is not without its own sensual pleasure, genuine infatuation and even feeling—even if the primary impetus was, as she asserts, her attraction to the teacher's authority and power. Not even Anna Trajan is reduced; though aesthetically as well as humanly unpleasant—yellow skin, warts, and a passion for gorging cream cakes—she is not incapable of eliciting sympathy and respect. She carries the profound hurt of a past love with a married man with dignity, and is protective enough of Vera (the personal chosen over the Party rules) to try to prevent her public confession.

What is unambiguous in the film is Gabor's evocation of the self-criticism session, and his image of Vera's ultimate destiny. The session is presided over by a young, cold, contemptuous bureaucrat, who severely dresses down most of the students, leaving some of them in tears. The critiques feel canned and prescribed—telling old revolutionaries to lose their arrogance, intellectuals to learn to connect with ordinary workers, and others to be more aggressive. The prime value is placed on official approval and adherence to the Party line, not on the judgment of one's peers; and the Party is there to submerge any sign of independence and individuality. It's here that Vera shockingly confesses her affair with Istvan, apologizes for having done wrong, and throws herself on the mercy of the Party. Is her act a shrewd, calculated one, or the action of an insecure waif who loves the Party and its rigidities and rules more than anything else in the world? Gabor again leaves the interpretation of her behavior open. At the same time, her confession, with its destructive consequences for Istvan, has the force of a human obscenity, from which even she and her two mentors shrink later in horror. But the violation of the human that Vera commits is seen by the Party as an act of submission and a willingness to abdicate personal desire to party discipline, and it is exactly what is necessary to her success in the Party.

In the film's final scene, training concluded, Anna Trajan and Vera Angi ride back to Budapest in the sealed-off comfort of a limousine. Outside the car window, Maria Muskat passes on the road, laboriously but indomitably bicycling against the wind. Gabor's sympathies clearly lie with her, warm celebrator of the pleasure of the flesh and courageous defender of those attacked at the self-criticism session, champion of a hearty humanness. It is she who dominates the lyrical women's shower scene early in the film. Vera Angi, calling out through the car window to Maria—who doesn't hear her—has become severed from all that by her own devices and instincts, which propel her instead toward successful absorption into the Party bureaucracy. Vera's gain comes at an incalculable cost, and the sense of great tragic loss is unmistakable as the film closes. Perhaps Gabor's real subject is Hungary itself, necessarily concealed by setting the film in 1948 and presenting it as a critique of the past to avoid its being taken as a comment on the present. However that may be, the loss is perhaps not total. The final image of Maria Muskat, though one of enormous struggle in contrast to the powerful machinery of the official limousine, conveys great tenacity—the will for survival.

Angi Vera is a small, realistic film which eschews stunning compositions and virtuoso camera angles for pans and cuts to people's faces. Gabor is a humanist who is on the side of human feelings and passions, antipathetic to the doctrinaire and puritanical, and he never resorts to polemic or bombast to make his point. What is most distinctive about this minor masterpiece is Gabor's gift for subtly capturing the vagaries of human behavior even in the most ideologically charged situations. In Vera herself, he and Veronika Papp have created a character whose multi-layered motivations make not for confusion, but for the mysterious complexity of human life itself.

—LEONARD AND BARBARA QUART

ALLEGRO BARBARO

Director: Miklós Jancsó. Script: Gyula Hernádi and Miklós Jancsó. Photography: János Kende.

The name Miklós Jancsó and the long take have become nearly synonymous over the last 15 years. Since *The Round-Up,* his style has evolved toward an ever increasing intricacy of seamless choreographed camera and object movement. The ascendancy of the long take in the 12-shot film *Elektreia*

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suggests that Jancsó's goal may have been to eliminate cutting altogether. That the sense of *Elektreia* would be only negligibly altered if the film had actually consisted of just one (technical difficulties aside) 76-minute shot indicates how unessential a role montage plays.

But this is definitely not the case with Jancsó's latest film *Allegro Barbaro,* in which montage works in a way that is central to the film's structure. True, there are only 22 shots, but within and among these shots Jancsó develops a new rigorous interrelationship between his montage and *mise en scène* that allows him to delineate changes in tense and point of view, and to open a whole new territory for his stylistic explorations.

As with his previous work, in this film Jancsó chronicles the shifting movements of oppressors and oppressed through the flux of history. Set in Hungary at the time of the Horthy regime's collaboration with Nazi Germany, the film centers on the story of István Zsadányi (György Cserhalmi), a member of the ruling class who is in love with Mari Bankós (György Tarján), a peasant who is the daughter of the leader of the peasant movement.

István's allegiance is divided between his social position and his personal life. In the first third of the film his attention fluctuates between the highest government officials (his brother Gábor and his old friend the prime minister) and radical peasants. István intercedes for Mari who has been arrested as a communist agitator; but before long he visits the prime minister's unconscionably opulent mansion. At István's own estate, the peasants are residents of what appears to be his utopian experiment/revolutionary training ground. Both the prime minister and the old Bankós—rival leaders of their respective classes—concur in their views of István: "He is of a different class. He won't change." Bankós opposes his daughter's marriage to István since he wonders if the young aristocrat's proposal isn't merely some whim. Bankós is arrested and István again uses his privileged position to mediate a release. István wins an ensuing power play against his brother and soldiers but, as he soon discovers, the victory is short lived.

The contradictions of István's position increase as the film proceeds. Circumstances force him to further incline toward the peasant class, and in doing so, his greatest inadequacy is uncovered: the inability to function as part of a group. These circumstances unfold as the elaborate rituals of István's and Mari's wedding are interrupted by the entrance of the prime minister who announces that István's estate is to be put under surveillance. In what is more of a threat than a plea, he tells István to stop his "half-Bolshie nonsense." Before long, Bankós is killed and the entire estate is occupied. An outraged István kills the prime minister, but it is designated an accident and Gábor is appointed the new prime minister.

István's behavior remains desultory because the assassination is, after all, an emotional response to the murder of Mari's father. This is hardly the stuff of commitment to a revolution. István is further put to the test as the realities of class conflict destroy any hope he may yet have had to continue his precarious balancing act. When István discovers Mari has been arrested on a trumped-up charge of murdering a soldier, his first action is to indulge in a fantasy in which Mari and himself embrace within a circle of dancing peasants. Finally, he pleads with Gábor, who is his last link to the old order. Not obtaining what he wants, István rides his bicycle behind some shrubbery and, incredibly, reappears on foot in a clothing change which implies a newfound commitment to the peasant cause: he wears a plain military jacket and carries a flag—the same Hungarian tri-color Bankós carried to his death.

This transformation is bizarre. Yet, when viewed in conjunction with other less extreme anomalous occasions that precede this particular scene, there emerges a discernible pattern of an increasing number of nonrealistic components appearing within an apparently realistic situation. These occasions arise when the appearance of an object, a movement of either an actor or an object, even an entire composition, strikes the viewer as odd or somewhat off-key in what is generally believed to be a realistic context. This eccentric mixture results in intermittent, brief lapses of credibility, and intimates that something might be amiss with the reality of what the viewer is watching—or that something may be wrong with the way the viewer is perceiving that reality. Bizarre as these occasions may be, they do not as yet contradict any narrative logic—that is to say they may be still accepted within a realistic context without causing

viewer incomprehension. That this is so is indicative of the persuasive power Jancsó manages to impart to each moment of the film through his use of spatial homogeneity and a specific historical milieu.

By using the long take, Jancsó has ample opportunity to place the anomalous object or action in the same space, and often at the same time as the normative action. In the long fluid takes there is such a rapid succession of events at various planes within the image that it is difficult to keep up with all of them. Hence, the viewer tends to see the anomalous occasion, along with the director's use of music and dance, not as any violation of the laws governing narrative logic (reality), but rather as a stylistic quirk, an exercise of poetic license; or, as has been the charge against Jancsó, another example of his "excessive mannerism." Rarely are we called upon in a film to sort out such a combination of incongruous elements in a homogeneous space, and we are caught unprepared to make distinctions between what is real and what is not real within these shots. By using this incongruous mixture of seemingly real and seemingly unreal events in the same space, Jancsó exploits the long take's inherent ability to effect a strong impression of reality.

Adding to the film's persuasive power is the presence of events that correspond to the course of Hungarian history during World War II. The Hungarian alliance with Nazi Germany is referred to at the outset of the film since the prime minister and Gábor are away at a meeting with Hitler. The arrival of war is conveyed as exploding bombs interrupt the film's sedate opening. The moral deprivation of Hungarian leadership is evident in the numerous machinations of the prime minister, Gábor and other officials. The rather late (1944), but nonetheless devastating Nazi occupation of Hungary and its mechanized extermination program are brutally portrayed. And the defeat of Axis forces is implied toward the end. No matter how abstractly presented, these events that parallel what we know as history resist interpretation as illusion and therefore help to prevent the viewer from continuously doubting the reality of what he/she is seeing.

As the film proceeds, the anomalous occasions increase in both frequency and in the degree to which they appear incongruous with their context. Since their effect is cumulative, a tension between the real and the unreal slowly builds through the film. We might even say that incongruity moves from the background in the early stages of the film, where in most cases it is manifest as only a minor component of a profuse *mise en scène,* to the foreground in the latter stages, where an extreme incongruity becomes the dominant characteristic of the major dramatic action. Always moving against viewer expectation, the film never fails to surprise. As this is particularly true of the concluding events, it is necessary to recount them in some detail.

At István's estate, the commander of the occupying forces tries to goad Mari into attempting escape. Mari steadfastly refuses. She then has a fantasy of István and herself shot down in each other's arms. After this romantic daydream ends, the commander offers to grant Mari a last request and she asks to be able to make love to István one last time. When the commander refuses, she tells him "any two" men will do. He allows her to choose two condemned compatriots, and then leaves them to their last pleasure. Mari asks the two men to kill her. The commander, meanwhile, stands inside the house looking through a window in which he envisions István, Mari, and others shooting at him with machine guns. He is told that the two men have drowned Mari in the lake and, moving outside, he orders her body to be riddled with bullets. Bombs explode. Back in the suddenly deserted house, István enters, carrying the flag. He moves outside toward the lake and finds it also deserted. Looking up he sees paratroopers fill the sky and he waves them on. At last István acts in accordance with the needs of the revolution. Or does he?

Until this point, the film follows what appears to be a relatively straightforward narrative, the three fantasy asides and the anomalous occasions included. What happens in the remaining two or three minutes of the film is astonishing. Jancsó plunges the viewer into total uncertainty by tracking the camera from István waving the flag, through the house, to the other side, where we witness a set-up identical to an earlier shot of a motionless Mari in the back seat of István's red sports car. Then, dressed in the suit he wore at the beginning

István and Mari, before being shot down in her fantasy: ALLEGRO BARBARO *Photo:* MOMA

of the film, István enters the frame, seats himself in the car, but, rather than placing his head in his arms on the steering wheel as before, he turns to Mari who rises, and they embrace. The key-light—the only artificial illumination in this shot—goes out, and the final shot follows. In a reprise of the end of the film's third shot, we see István (in the suit again) before the camera, positioned in a medium close-up. Bartók's piano piece (the source for the film's title, and hitherto present only in the third shot) is heard, the frame freezes, and the credits appear.

The perplexity experienced by the viewer is induced by an inescapable narrative illogic in the closing events of the film. More than ten minutes long, the penultimate shot contains an abundance of information: the commander attempting to convince Mari to escape, Mari's fantasy, the offer to grant a last request, the commander's fantasy, the discovery of Mari's body, bullets fired into that body, the appearance of István with the flag, the paratroopers, and the embrace between István and Mari in the car. It is the absence of cutting that makes the order of these events unacceptable in what the viewer had taken to be a realistic context. Were there cuts, the viewer might be able to accept this succession of events as a series of fragmented recollections of a controlling memory—in the manner of Resnais. But this is a single take in which whole armies disappear and appear in silence; István, after developing into a committed revolutionary, seems to revert to his old ways; and Mari drowns but then reappears to embrace István. We actually see Mari die twice if we include her fantasy. Paradoxically, this obvious fantasy by itself does not disconcert the viewer, but in the overall context of the shot adds to viewer confusion. Our ability to distinguish the obvious fantasy from other events adds supplementary credibility to the reality of everything not contained within it. If there were no fantasy asides at all, or if these fantasies were presented in no different a manner than all other events, then the entire shot, due to a uniform illogicality, could be read as surrealistic.

Preceding Mari's fantasy, mist fills the frame, acting as a transition between what we take to be real events and what we interpret as events imagined by Mari. Earlier, Jancsó uses the same device to introduce István's fantasy in which he and Mari are inside the circle of dancing peasants. The use of the mist as a transition device achieves the effect of something between a fade and a dissolve while allowing Jancsó to maintain the continuous take. Recognizing this connotation that the mist develops through the film does not, however, at first help the viewer to unravel the whole puzzle of real and imagined events within this shot. In fact, it tends to obscure these matters even more.

If we assume that all imagined events in the film are preceded by the mist-filled frame, what then do we make of the commander's obvious fan-

tasy, not preceded by any mist, in which István, Mari, and others shoot at him? Again, the shot seems impossibly nonsensical. Add the final shot of the film, the reprise of the tail end of the third shot, and Jancsó's challenge to the viewer is complete: Is this shot in present time? Is it a flashback? Is it an all too familiar post-textual credit sequence—footage consisting of music (the film's musical theme), freeze frame, and credits?

The answer lies in looking to, and through, the mist to uncover the structure of the entire film. The mist first appears at the end of the third shot as István stands before the camera in medium close-up. Significantly, the viewer tends to forget this on a first viewing of the film. Here there is an essential difference in the way Jancsó uses the mist: he cuts while it still fills the frame. At all other times, the mist functions to set off a *whole* fantasy sequence *within* a long take—from its beginning, marked by the mist's initial appearance, to its resolution which is brought about by a clearing of the mist, and the camera's return to its pre-fantasy position in which the daydreamer is framed. If we reason that the mist always works as a transition from real to imagined events, keeping in mind that the first use of the mist is not brought to its cleared-frame resolution until the last shot, then we can conclude that everything happening between the first appearnce of mist over István (shot #3) and the return to him in the same position without the mist (shot #22) is imagined. This is exactly how the film works.

Of the film's 22 shots the first three and the twenty-second are the only shots occurring in the present. This leaves shots 4 through 21 as an unbroken succession of imagined occurrences, or as Christian Metz would call them, "subjective inserts." Viewed in the context of dream-logic, the illogicality of seeing Mari dead, then alive, is perfectly acceptable. Even the lack of mist before the commander's fantasy (the last of the three fantasies within István's overall fantasy) makes sense among events controlled by a dreamer. As in Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* where disappearing men and dissolving walls are made acceptable through a controlling dream consciousness, all of the anomalous occasions of the film—mysterious hang gliders floating in space going nowhere; the sparse dwelling on István's estate; someone bouncing up and down on an unseen trampoline in the background; a brief low-angle slow-motion close-up of the legs of a woman dancing; a rigid posturing of the occupying soldiers that borders on absurdity; a motorized swing on which the peasants are given a circular ride to death—all these anomalous occasions are couched in a dream dimension, making them unobjectionable to even the strictest realists. Conversely, the events we had confidently interpreted as portrayals of historical fact during the years 1939–1945 are relegated to István's own remarkably accurate ruminations on the future from his standpoint of just before the war.

Solitary hang glider. Photo: MOMA

The crucial cut that marks the start of the subjective section transpires without our having any notion of its real significance. When this cut from István to a long shot of a lake occurs, it reads merely as a location change—when in fact it constitutes a

change in both point of view (from objective to subjective) and tense (from the present to a quasi-future conditional). The imperceptibility by which Jancsó brings off this shift enables him to structure 95 per cent of the film as István's dream of which the viewer is totally unaware, and, as a result, forces the viewer to interrogate his/her own experience of the entire film to a degree which is rare.

Allegro Barbaro deals with one man coming to terms with the contradictions of his life. Through his mind's eye we partake in the process by which he arrives at a recognition of his problem and its possible solution. The incident that helps set off his complicated interior process is his telling a soldier that Mari is his god-daughter. István's dishonest reluctance to acknowledge publicly their true relationship, indicative of his noncommittal stance at the beginning of the film, is the catalyst that helps make István begin to recognize the impossibility of a situation in which he attempts to straddle irreconcilable opposites. The first cut of the film accentuates this situation.

The opening shot is a simple pan left, which follows István driving his car to the prime minister's estate. Leading to the mansion is a bridge over water (an appropriate image which points up the feudal character of Hungarian society at the time: a moat). István drives the car only half-way across the bridge. He leaves the car in order to ask the whereabouts of the prime minister. Uncharacteristically, Jancsó abruptly cuts to a shot with the camera located off the left side at the center of the bridge, thereby underscoring István's dilemma of being caught between two sides. The correlation of István with the camera's unrealistic position (an unnatural position, suspended in mid-air over water) is augmented by the director's decision to hold this camera position, simply panning to follow István departing from the estate until he is out of the frame. The tension between the pull of opposing forces on István is elucidated in the very next shot.

After Mari's release, she and István, holding hands, but maintaining an innocent distance, walk away from the soldiers. As they approach István's car they move farther apart from each other until the car eventually comes between them and their hands separate. Mari does not take her eyes off István as she walks backwards up the road. Quite confused, István drives the car very slowly down the road toward the backward-tracking camera and away from Mari, his eyes focused on the rear view mirror. Once she is out of the frame (and out of the rear view mirror), István stops the car, gets out, and walks to the now stationary camera. At this point the mist enters the frame and the film becomes István's introspection.

It is obvious that István is far from being a committed revolutionary at the outset of the film—all the misgivings expressed about István's behavior by the prime minister, by Gábor, and by Mari's father are manifestations of István's self doubt. Fear of losing his individuality hinders István from joining the movement. A herd of grazing sheep situated in the background of the sixth and twenty-first shots (Mari in the car) highlight István's dread of conformity. A dialectic between collective action and individual action runs through the entire subjective section. As we see repeatedly, the problem for István is his inability to integrate individual acts with the collective movement. Preceding the death of Bankós, István tells Mari "I will carry out the sentence of millions" by assassinating the prime minister. Mari instructs him that he is wrong and that he should act "collectively." The camera tracks to Bankós giving a talk to a group of peasants on the need for responsible individual action in "exceptional cases" that require an "example in history." The talk completed with Bankós's point won, he puts theory into practice as he takes the flag and crosses into a prohibited zone to his death. The next shot follows quickly. István, acting too fast and thinking too slow, engages in behavior opposite to Bankós: the killing of the prime minister—an irresponsibly impulsive action because of István's failure to consider the possible consequences of his act. Killing the prime minister turns out to be both damaging (Mari's second arrest is a direct result) and futile. The camera's lateral tracking movement in this one-shot scene emphasizes the futility of István's action. After repeatedly tracking and panning left, right, left, right, and so forth, the camera, like István, finds itself at the end of the shot back in its starting position. Eventually, István arrives at a potential solution to his problem as he envisions

events that could only stem from a belief in the possibility of affecting a balance between collective and individual action.

As the subjective section of the film nears its end, István's commitment to the revolution coheres, and events in this dream world reflect his change of attitude. Hence, no mist precedes the commander's fantasy of his own shooting as this seems as much a possibility in the coming struggle as Mari's own death. The solitary hang gliders, symbols of directionless bourgeois individualism, are replaced by the liberating paratroopers whose definite direction and purpose unite with the new faith István expresses by waving them on. István's embrace of Mari is the quintessential form of his decision since Mari is the film's personification of collectivism as well as an individual woman.

In the last shot, back to reality, we see István stand before the camera and scrutinize his surroundings. Unlike his puzzled aspect in the third shot, here István wears a look of assurance. Bartók's piano piece—the same piece contained in the earlier *Cantata* and *Elektreia,* which has become for Jancsó something of a victory march of the proletariat—plays again, but at this point in the film there is an underlying unity between music and image: Bartók's first music to assimilate folk influences and István's own assimilation into the peasant movement. As this is the second film of a projected trilogy (the first, *Hungarian Rhapsody,* has not yet been shown in this country), we await the next film to see how István carries out his resolve.

Allegro Barbaro is a remarkable accomplishment. The dream structure is one of many challenges in the film. A seemingly infinite variety of invention only begins to become apparent on subsequent viewings. The film's formal rigor is stunning. Like István, Jancsó has recognized the need to temper the collective (montage) with the individual (shot). While he may still have some distance to cover before he attains a true balance, the Hungarian director has discovered a new, unique, dynamic relationship between montage and *mise en scene,* and in doing so has infused a much needed vitality into contemporary cinema.

—WILLIAM KELLY

ALLEGRO BARBARO: *István about to greet the liberating paratroopers. Photo:* MOMA

HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

(Magyar Rapszodia) Director: Miklós Jancsó. Screenplay: Gyula Hernádi, Miklós Jancsó. Photography: János Kende. Editor: Zsuzsa Csakany.

Since Miklós Jancsó won a golden palm for directing *Red Psalm,* he has become the choreographer laureate of Hungarian history. With two installments of a trilogy (unlikely to be completed), he has paid homage to two of his countrymen who both tried to find in the countryside solid founda-

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tions and concrete images for a truly national musical idiom. Although Jancso's idiom is visual, he is not unlike Ferenc Liszt and Béla Bartok in his virtuosity. *Hungarian Rhapsody,* an obvious homage to Liszt, seems at the moment to be fated to critical exile and ignored by official Hungarian cultural policy, while *Allegro Barbaro* is promoted as a "work of art." At the Cannes festival the two were called *Rhapsodie Hongroise,* Parts I and II. Jancsó and Hernádi did not originally conceive of their project as a trilogy, but the story proved to be too long for a single feature, and thus the reconstruction of the life of a single young man became the centrifugal force of this historical cycle.

André Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was the son of a minor aristocrat. In 1911 he assassinated the leader of the peasants' party and became an officer of the Hussars and sometime hero. After the fall of the monarchy, he joined Horthy and rallied round the counter-revolution, providing (along with his brother) leadership for the White Terror. Through the twenties, Bajcsy-Zsilinzsky became increasingly alienated from his cohorts, in particular from those bourgeois who formed a kind of fraternity devoted to the esthetics of violence. Developing an antipathy to the Teutonic model, he opposed Hitler and the fascists, but, primarily, anything and everything Germanic. He committed himself to the struggle for independence in Hungarian political life and to a policy which incorporated the peasants and united them into a radical political party. Thus, when the Germans came to occupy Hungary in 1944, he helped lead the resistance movement, although his brother joined the Hungariain Nazi movement. At Christmas, 1944, the Hungarian Nazis hung André Bajcsy-Zsilinszky as the leader of the peasants—whose leader he himself had murdered some thirty years earlier. An avenue in Budapest has been named in honor of him, and Jancsó's film is a tribute at least as great.

Perhaps the planned trilogy is less tribute than tribunal, weighing the power of violence and beauty over the mind and the degree to which truth can obviate fact. Jancsó's rendition of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky's history departs from that particular man's suffering and, as the saga of the character István Szadányi, becomes a controlling metaphor for Hungarian history. Jancsó firmly believes that since realism (or *petit realisme* as he called it), can be used to falsify history, an artist must invoke his right to imagine history or to recreate it on a theatrical level so that its appeal is to ultimate human truths rather than to the ever-disputed "facts" or official versions. Thus the prime minister in the film, Charles Hederváry, bears a historical name but the persona is taken from several different sources; in fact, his death is a total fiction—no Hungarian prime minister was assassinated late in the war, although the minister of the interior of a later 1949 Communist dictatorship was hanged.

A search for the historical relevancies in either film would be doomed to nit-picking questions of adaptation. Jancsó's gift being that of a choreographer, we would be well-advised instead to appreciate the mythic progression of his images into themes. *Hungarian Rhapsody* opens with a stylish family sequestered in a building—their house and home?—while outside, beyond them or their ken, a peasant celebration is underway; gendarmes arrive who hose down the entire gathering, presumably to get them under control. The young men of the family also become involved in this symbolic "baptism." Just as a dance cannot be characterized by a single pattern on the stage, or music in a single chord, the film refuses to yield such symbolic sequences to a list of particular equivalences.

Enemies identifiable by their uniforms, peasants portrayed in spotless white shirts, straight-haired maidens as sacrificial victims, repression and revolution in a symbiosis that insures each historical cataclysm its psychological purge: these are the images that Jancsó works with to render emotional histories of the Hungarians. In *Hungarian Rhapsody* a full assembly of peasants happily takes over a celebration beneath a scaffolding (resembling a barn-raising) in the second long sequence. These half-built structures—roofs supported by beams or, in the previous sequence, by white columns—help define the space Jancsó is claiming for his dance and serve as images of transformed structures throughout the film. For example, the columned house of the Zsadányi family will become the headquarters of an independent fascist elite, serve as a prison and training camp, and

come to be more of a pigsty than the spare wooden lines of the barn-like structure could ever afford. There is a later scene beneath the barn roof, which is a test of István's discipline: he is ordered to shoot his superior officer. Unable to respond, he is commanded to shoot his own horse, presumably because a cavalry officer without his mount is a contradiction in terms. He painfully shoots the beast, and its slow, painful death—the most realistic thing the camera records—remains an image of discipline as senseless violence.

As usual, Jancsó uses nudity as a celebration of humanism, providing his actors with the grace and anonymity of classical statuary. The human form as the measure of all things offers a cinematic barometer for the uses and abuses of power. It evokes an eroticism in whose presence we too feel naked, vulnerable, and therefore afraid. No matter how beautifully or peaceably juxtaposed, the contoured forms of the human body together with the meticulous uniforms of figures representing authority present such incompatible violence. The opening scene of *Hungarian Rhapsody* shows a naked girl cavorting politely with soldiers in a celebration more restrained than such circumstances would in all probability yield. A background voice asking, "Where have they gone, those who carried truth in their hearts and minds?" implies that such a golden age was and ever will be just as short-lived as this dangerous flirtation of skin and sword, flesh and leather.

Just as the imagist poets find natural objects adequate to express an intellectual/emotional complex (nature being just about as intellectual or emotional as anything has a right to be, as Ezra Pound has assured us), so Jancsó's best images often refer to nothing more than their own coexistence on the screen. For example, the candles burning on an easel upon which there hangs a mirror arrest ones attention, until the eye picks up the repetition of parallel lines from the candles to the columns supporting the family mansion in the background. This intellectual/emotional complex implies abstractions such as narcissism enshrined, social pillars transformed to wax, etc., and yet an abstraction is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain what Jancsó "means." Some images seem to yield more sense than others, because they are not peculiar to this work or even to Jancsó: a couple crouch in the shadow of a red sports car, her naked skin in as sharp a contrast to his uniform as the prancing horse on the other side of the automobile to the low, functional lines of the vehicle. Evocations of oppositions such as automation *vs.* nature or open *vs.* closed (defined) spaces can be observed by the alert critic. However, Jancsó's films are better appreciated as music or poetry for their mellifluous rhythms and surreal imagery than for their contributions to structuralism.

Occasionally, as over a tree's far-flung root, one stumbles over the plot-line, Jancsó and Hernádi, in pursuit of the "secrets of history," hit upon recognizably universal truths in the dialogue punctuating the filmed catalogue of emotional reactions to revolution. In distinction to his detractors, Jancsó is not so naive as to believe that the struggle against authority is that of white-shirted peasants being trampled by a mounted gendarmerie, but the image has iconographic value for establishing what kind of cruelty inflicts enough resentment to generate revolution. The philosophies that have historically accompanied such icons are incorporated into the film's development in scenes where a fellow officer discharges a round on Jacobinism and its principles—the pursuit of order and revolution, as a woman flirts with István until he blurts out, "The aristocracy will always live in communism. The Reds want something that has always existed."

The self-serving nature of aristocracy is doubted by no one, least of all by Jancsó's supposed Hungarian audiences. In question is whether it perforce degenerates into the kind of decadence Jancsó portrays in a cavern where crystal, dancing, a baroque fountain, and candelabra provide the background for an assassination plot over dinner. This is a long sequence of light and shadow, as stylish artifice is posed and juxtaposed against the searching face of István, to whose despair the entire celebration erupts into Russian roulette. István stretches his lady's corpse onto a bench, as sprays of water drench the entire scene, bringing the imagery full circle back to the opening scene of the peasant fête. Here, however, the violence is not the collision of sadist and victim, but rather

the collusion of masochism and suicide often depicted as the last expensive thrill of a collapsing power structure. (Russian roulette has become a *beau geste* of late, with too many directors using it as a metaphor for finding meaning at five-to-one odds.)

If Jancsó seems enraptured with his own ceremonial recreation of peasant dance and plebeian prance, it can be seen as an appropriate and dignified response to a great ceremonial military tradition in Hungary, a country which even today maintains its position as the front-runner in the Olympic pentathlon, a sport demanding excellence in fencing, riding, shooting, and a stamina that comes only from rigorous training—in other words, from a way of life that reflects aristocratic virtues and values. Jancsó endows his aristocrats with these qualities and in both films shows the soldiers in constant training before the veranda of the house. It is interesting to note that after World War II, when cavalry became obsolete, there was an attempt to replace the riding event in the pentathlon with motor-cycling—the reaction to which was not unlike our own experience watching these machines circling around the yard in ugly imitation of Jancsó's previously mounted troops. Noblesse oblige seems unlikely to be a salient characteristic of an aristocracy stripped of its chargers.

In a final scene of *Hungarian Rhapsody*, the Prime Minister comes to command István to disband his private army, another feature of Hungarian life which is not beyond belief. Because the nobility had traditionally maintained small privately trained corps to be led in any grander Austro-Hungarian enterprise, it would not have been unusual in the thirties for the Zsadányi family to call up such a force on the assumption that they would need to fight to reestablish their hegemony over the upstart peasants.

For the philosophical underpinnings of aristocratic power-wielding, Jancsó allows a character speaking a fastidiously rhetorical German to deliver a tirade on madness and power: where power alone does not suffice, madness will find a way to establish total control . . . or something like that. Not only is the logic of this speech specious, but the German uttered by Udo Kier bears absolutely no relation to the subtitles I have seen. How subtitling could ever so utterly and fallaciously steer another course remains as obscure as the character Udo Kier is portraying, one Alexander von Bülow, whose last name invokes a great Prussian military family of the nineteenth century. In response to questions about the fatal subtitling Jancsó, like Atlas, shrugged. Thus the first film strands us amid several riddles, unlikely to be soon solved.

—KAREN JAEHNE

JUST LIKE AT HOME

(Olyan Mint Otthan) Director: Marta Meszaros. Script: Ildiko Karody. Cinematography: Lajos Koltai. Produced by Hunnia Studio.

Just Like At Home, Hungarian director Marta Meszaros's eighth feature film, is a strangely beautiful, exquisitely complex work, full of ambiguity and mystery. What it concerns itself with is the emotional and sensual bond between a grown man and a ten-year-old girl.

If this theme sounds like it's been played out before in other man-girl films like *Lolita*, *Pretty Baby*, and *Paper Moon*, it is best to be warned that this film is nothing like them. There is none of the obvious nymphet sexuality of the first two, and none of that cute, gooey, life-is-but-a-dream comedy of the last. Meszaros's film is so subtly and naturally developed, so hidden and understated, and all played against a backdrop that is so grim and desperate, that it takes on a human realism that leaves all comparison with the other films by the wayside.

The work that immediately compares is Wim Wenders's *Alice in the Cities* (see Michael Covino, "Wim Wenders: A Worldwide Homesickness" *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1977-78). They have the same lonely father figure adopting the same isolated, spiritually abandoned little girl, and the same pervading sense of homesickness. Meszaros also shares Wenders's skepticism: the search for home only leads to a dead end. It is finally only the fragile relationship established by the man and girl that seems to count for anything—the true home at last.

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The work that immediately compares is Wim Wenders's *Alice in the Cities* (see Michael Covino, "Wim Wenders: A Worldwide Homesickness" *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1977-78). They have the same lonely father figure adopting the same isolated, spiritually abandoned little girl, and the same pervading sense of homesickness. Meszaros also shares Wenders's skepticism: the search for home only leads to a dead end. It is finally only the fragile relationship established by the man and girl that seems to count for anything—the true home at last.

But after that Meszaros and Wenders part company. Their form and method are as different as an asteroid and a comet. Wenders's search for home is made in a dead, alien, washed-out, black-and-white universe. Meszaros's "dead-ended" world explodes with color, sexuality, sounds, animals, water, fertile ground; it dazzles with eyes, ears, noses, and mouths. It is a dead end that is beautiful to watch. In fact, the whole world seems to become an extension of the protagonists' bodies themselves. What this does is invest the theme of homesickness with an underlying sense of urgency and fear, and an overwhelming sense of sorrow if one cannot have this world for long. And that is the tragic dimension at work here, because for Meszaros there is most definitely a *world* out there. It is a world much more resonant than Wenders's, a living, fire-breathing place, and it just cannot be held onto. The social ills that affect Hungary like an epidemic, the alcoholism and self destruction, are only part of this emotional loss—not the cause of it. Yet, despite this constant sorrow, maybe even because of it, the film manages to develop a natural empathy with everything that can touch the human heart, and it achieves all this with a brutal unsentimentality.

Briefly, the film deals with Andras Novak (Jan Nowicki), a brooding, self-absorbed university instructor who, in a bout of suicidal homesickness, returns to his native Hungary after taking an unwarranted extension on an American scholarship. The revisited homeland possesses his parents (who live in a beautiful, provincial wine-making village outside of Budapest), his mistress, Anna (Anna Karina—a modern urban woman who shares a Budapest apartment with another man and a small boy who might or might not be Andras's), his ex-wife (whom we never see), and his university associates (who sadly inform him that his overstay in America has resulted in the termination of his teaching position at the school.)

This overstay seems to have been interpreted by this "circle of friends" as some sort of political defection. Yet this is one thing Meszaros is never clear about, even though the political repercussions of his stay in America keep cropping up in the film and will not leave him alone. For example, the police come to his door and tell him to report to an official inquiry, an inquiry we mysteriously never see take place or hear of again. But for Andras, his absence seems more like a spiritual defection, a soul search—one undertaken out of artistic need. Indeed, we are slowly made aware of a desperate need he has to write, but his isolation and homesickness cut him off, squeeze him so tight he cannot write anything. This is a concept that his "friends" do not seem to comprehend at all, even though they graciously welcome him home. His sexy mistress doesn't get it. His father—a hard-drinking ex-boxer whose embarrassing attempts at retaining his fading manhood leave Andras weary—doesn't get it. His academic colleagues, who stare at him with blank faces, do not get it. Nobody gets it, or seems to have time to listen to him. Faced with this morass of misunderstanding, after all his emotional wandering through America, Andras is left totally drained, his libido is shot to hell, and he is left without any "enthusiasm" to either live or die.

Right after Andras returns from America, he visits Anna. He alludes to his homesickness, and informs her that he has returned to Budapest to take whatever consequences his absence-"defec-

JUST LIKE AT HOME ▶

tion" might have aroused. In the meantime he tells her that he is also returning to his village, returning to, as he puts it, "mother and the hearth—the desire of my heart."

After we see the village it is easy to understand how it became his "heart's desire." Meszaros has filmed it with deep affection. The land is warm, rich, fertile; the pastures are full of cows, with the wheat piled up into golden mounds that look like women's breasts glistening in the sun. It is soft, inviting, radiantly green and yellow. It is, in a word, the Mother Earth. And it is here, smelling its air and working in its fields, that Andras's desperate homesickness begins to lift. But something is missing. He is not really home yet,and he does not seem to be able to make the full journey alone.

While Andras basks against one of these mounds of sun-drenched wheat a black mongrel dog passes by. It brings with it the fellow traveller who eventually accompanies Andras on his cathartic odyssey home. This companion is a little freckle-faced blonde girl names Zsuzsi (played by an amazingly precocious Magyar girl named Zsuzsa Czinkoczy—a girl with a set of facial expressions that seem to take her through the whole range of a woman's experience from age six to sixty, and who is the heart and soul of the film.) It is the dog however that Andras immediately fancies. He offers Zsuzsi a large amount of money to buy him, but she turns his offer down flat. Undaunted by the child's refusal, Andras goes behind her back and buys the dog from her mother—a devoted but barefoot and pregnant woman with a house full of children, an alcoholic husband, and no time to really attend to any of them. He takes the dog back with him to his apartment in Budapest. Outraged Zsuzsi hitchhikes all the way to his flat to retrieve the dog. When she gets there they argue until she forces Andras to take her and the dog back to their village.

It is during the auto trip back home, as Andras moodily yells at the girl about his lousy luck to be stuck with her, that they begin to drift slowly together. By the time the car pulls in Zsuzsi's drive they have already formed an emotional bond that eventually results in a sweet, yet intense father-daughter relation.

At first, like that of any father for his daughter, or any daughter for her father, their "affair" unfolds in an almost charming, humorous, completely natural way. In autumn-gold pastoral light Andras toils in the field in her presence, he teaches her how to swim, they ride bicycles together in the hills, and, holding on to each other, they crush grapes into wine with their feet. Of course, an erotic undercurrent is there all the time, although it is very subtle. Andras is no libertine with his little girl, and she, of course, is too young to understand her attraction for him. It is innocent, yet it isn't. Meszaros is no fool. The sensual experiences Andras and Zsuzsi share with each other become the axis upon which this whole film wheels. Everything they do together is done with the body, and machines are literally done away with in two specific instances: the grape-crushing episode, and, in a grand sweeping track shot composed right out of Istvan Szonyi's pre-World War II paintings of the Hungarian harvests, we see the whole village engaged in cutting wheat with scythes. These scenes, specifically the latter, are strikingly visual, and full of swaying rhythmical movement, like a choreographed ballet, and all very erotic. The woman with whom Andras has actual physical relations (Anna) senses this aspect in the man-girl relationship and becomes jealous. Of course, so does Zsuzsi, who at one point tries to get Andras's attention away from Anna by making up her face. There is sex in everything.

Meszaros dedicated this film to her father, the sculptor Laszlo Meszaros, and it is from a child's point-of-view that we see Andras—the camera always shoots from the little girl's eye level—but what makes this film so beguiling is how it takes care to let us know that it is a relationship full of sexual mystery, scary and ambiguous, and amazing all at the same time.

All of this in the hands of a lesser talent might have seemed embarrassing and mawkish. Here it is crafted with great intelligence and penetration. The emotional vacuum and isolation out of which Zsuzsi and Andras's attraction is born is so realistically developed that it doesn't have to apologize for anything.

This organic flow is achieved not only by the considerable lyric qualities of the script, or by the ability of the cast, but most importantly, it is accomplished by the *cinematography.* Lajos Koltai (who most recently shot Pal Gabor's *Angi Vera*)

has achieved something akin to Nestor Almendros's work in *Days of Heaven*, where the natural color and light seem to come right out of the mood of its characters. For example, most of Andras's encounters with adults take place in dark places. There is nothing they can offer him anymore. But the yellow tones belong to the feminine land, and to blonde Zsuzsi. Wherever she is, a golden autumn sunshine falls all over her—it seeks her out.

But Meszaros's romance is much more deeply layered in ambiguity and complexity than just this simple color symbolism. The depth and range of the erotic experiences is provided a recurrent image, a leitmotif. It is in *water*, not sunshine, that Andras and Zsuzsi share their "rite of passage," their holy communion as it were.

When Andras works on the collective farm, it is Zsuzsi who provides all the workers with water. When there is a thunderstorm in the field Andras and Zsuzsi become soaked to the bone, and run hand in hand for shelter (the water dripping all over them like a blessing); when Andras takes Zsuzsi into a pond to teach her to swim she suddenly goes under the water and Andras pulls her out quickly and comforts her (like a baptism, so much simple purity is offered up); when Andras seals a letter he runs the dry flaps over Zsuzsi's wet tongue; Zsuzsi cooks Andras a fish she has just pulled out of the water and killed; and finally, when Andras showers a naked Zsuzsi in his tub, somewhere in the sound track, almost subliminal, is heard something that sounds like Handel's *Water Music*. Water is this film's poetic heart. In landlocked Hungary it is everywhere, and it rolls under Andras and Zsuzsi's feet as it does under one of Herman Melville's ships. And like Melville's aqueous worlds, Meszaros's amniotic promise of life is constantly haunted by an overbearing sense of death, and the quick, unavoidable extinction of anything that becomes precious. But the precious is all Andras looks for, and all Zsuzsi needs. In one scene he tells Anna that he is "unable to get closer to this land [Hungary] created of childhood memories from which no passports are available—but when I'm asleep I'm right there, don't you understand?" Only the little girl does—the dream of freedom and childhood memories in the flesh!

It really comes as no surprise when Andras finally takes Zsuzsi into his apartment. She lives with him, cooks for him, takes care of him, and he tutors her in her school work. Naturally this odd domestic scene causes lots of questions from his "friends," but he tells them all to mind their own business. He refuses to let Zsuzsi out of his life, he refuses to let Anna's jealousy poison his relationship with this little girl. He somehow puts off the police, he exorcises his suicidal terror, he casts off his father, as Zsuzsi casts off her family, and finally, looking into each other's eyes, they realize they have somehow come home. The artistic bond is complete. He is finally able to write it out of his system.

But it's a sad joke because there is no way they can keep it. Meszaros makes no bones about this. The grown man and the little girl's world implode on them from the moment they meet. In a way, in spite of the film's complete realism and believability, it is also a complete fantasy, a fairy tale, a romance of chivalry with Prince Charming and his little princess locked up in their castle, safe from all the death waiting for them outside. Father and daughter relationships are fundamentally doomed from the start. A relationship that can never really be—the tragedy of Electra. For two hours, though, we are all "asleep" watching it, in Andras's dreams.

For her past work Meszaros has gained a feminist reputation. Yet this film can have only one label: *human*. It is one of the most personal, up and down glides through a person's obsessions ever filmed. It is not political, it expresses no ideologies. What it does is claustrophobically concentrate on emotional problems that no political system in the world can solve—not America's or Hungary's. And it is so reticent, so quiet and respectful of these problems that it seems an extreme invasion of the characters' inner lives that we see what we do. On this level the film works well because we do feel that it is something precious and extremely fragile that we are being allowed to glimpse. We end up not really caring about all the annoying loose ends left untied, or about the poor dubbing. All of these things are incidental. It is a film about sensuality, and it works almost completely on a visual level—close to a silent film. It's a somber piece of visual poetry, a small masterpiece.

—JEFF HERMAN

THE SUDDEN WEALTH OF THE POOR PEOPLE OF KOMBACH

Director: Volker Schlöndorff. Script: Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta. Photography: Franz Rath. Music: Claus Doldinger. Editing: Claus von Boro.

In 1970, Volker Schlöndorff, assisted by his wife, Margarethe von Trotta, made *Der Plötzliche Reichtum der Armen Leute von Kombach (The Sudden Wealth of the Poor People from Kombach).* The film was based on the actual records of an armed robbery in the district of Hesse in the early nineteenth century. It was shot in black-and-white and is organized in, approximately, the following way.

The opening titles are superimposed over a sketch of a German village—presumably the village of Kombach. This sketch has the simplicity of a child's drawing, a simplicity which is never lost throughout the film.

After the titles, the film explodes into action. The camera is tracking right through some trees, following a group of peasants running through the woods. There is a sense of great urgency as the camera, moving right with an individual peasant, zip pans ahead of him and cuts to another peasant running the same way. Thus we have both a continuity of movement—the general thrust right—with spatial disruptions provided by the zip pans and cuts from one man to the next.

Although we don't yet know their names, we are following the Geiz family running through the Krosdorf forest to join up with other villagers who are planning to help them hold up the local stage coach and rob it of its gold. At a certain moment in this sequence, the camera jumps back to a long-shot of both the Geiz family running right within the frame and the other peasants running left to meet them—that is, running the other way. Then a further cut away from all of them as we pick up the stage coach drawn by horses galloping left along the road. The camera pans with it as it disappears through the trees.

There are several formal elements within this opening sequence, elements which embody separate potentialities for signification which can affect us in complex ways.

First of all, there is the excitement of the movement, both involving us kinaesthetically and yet dislocating our sense of place and time. This dislocation is furthered by the music. We hear a jazzy, flutey tune which is completely out of period—until we cut to the stage coach when a fanfare of trumpets conveys the appropriately regal atmosphere of a baroque court. Moreover (though we cannot yet be aware of this), this sequence, though it forms the opening of the film, belongs to the middle of the story when the actual robbery occurs. Finally, towards the end of this sequence when the movement slows down a little, a woman's voice provides a factual narration: "In the year 1822, a few peasants and workers of the village of Kombach decided to put an end to their misery." She then describes the regular shipment of the tax money from Hesse on its way from Biedenkopf to Giessen and explains how these poor people had decided to seize it. "According to the contemporary records of Court Secretary, Karl Franz," her voice continues, "the plot to rob the tax money should have originated in the following way."

Like the trumpets that end this sequence, these opening moments might themselves be seen as a kind of fanfare—a fanfare that simultaneously excites and distances us. Helped by the grainy simplicity of Franz Rath's camerawork, both the movement and the urgency of the running involves us with the action. At the same time, we are pulled back by the anachronism of the music and by the further anachronism (within this old tale about nineteenth-century patriarchal Germany) of hearing this narration from a female voice—undoubtedly that of Ms. von Trotta, who worked with Schlöndorff on the script. After this fanfare, the film itself begins.

We see Jacob Geiz in long-shot, cutting grass with his scythe and being put upon by the postmaster. We are then introduced to David Briel from Dexbach, a peddler of some kind and obviously Jewish, who approaches Jacob Geiz and (as the narrator explains) "spoke the following words to him." Briel is, in fact, the king-pin of this story, for it is his idea that they should steal the money; and by the end of this film, it is only Briel who manages to get away.

Der Plötzliche Reichtum der Armen Leute von Kombach is a moral fable—one of the finest examples of a Brechtian *Lehrstück* that I have ever seen on the screen. Largely through the commentary, facts, dates, and place-names abound throughout the film. The action is located precisely within a given place and time. With prosaic detail, we are shown and told as much as possible about these poor people's lives. Yet we are held back from empathetic involvement in the film as spectacle. If we are involved kinaesthetically with the movement of the camera and respond sympathetically to the gestic play between the actors—as in Peter Watkins's *Culloden,* we are forced by the commentary to reflect on what we see.

The factual, moralizing tone of the narration—a kind of "recitative," as Mireille Amiel has called it[1]—makes us recognize that *Kombach* is not just about a particular place and time but about a more general historical situation: what are the conditions necessary to create revolutionary consciousness among the common people and what are the ideological preconditions for any kind of social change?[2]

Kombach depicts a society locked within a state of prerevolutionary consciousness. It is prerevolutionary because it accepts as natural all the established hierarchies.[3] Even among the poor people, it is expected that the men should dominate the women and that Hans-Jacob Geiz should dominate his sons. Heinrich Geiz, who lives with a woman out of wedlock, must accept her constant terror that their child will be damned because unblessed by the church. Only David Briel can move on because, as a peddler, he is not tied to the land. While all the poor people dream of escaping to "Amerika," only Briel has the lack of roots that enables him to leave.

Like the opening sketch behind the titles of the village of Kombach, the poor people in this film possess the simplicity of children. They act without foresight or political consciousness, as if someone else were in charge of their lives. On the level of plot, the first half of this film records several failed attempts to hold up the coach. One time, they get lost in the snow. Another time, while they are all set in ambush, they never come out because they failed to decide who should give the signal. Yet another time, they are stopped by a young recruit who has agreed to come in with them because, this time, there is no money on the coach.

These scenes of attempted robbery, many of which are comic in the depicted simplicity of the peasants, are intercut with scenes in the home, planning their next move, or with scenes in the forest, the peasants frolicking about, rehearsing their actions, waiting for the coach to appear. There is one particularly effective moment when we see them all dancing about, very much like children, singing their "off to Amerika" song, imagining a land of incredible wealth and opportunity, a land where (as the subtitles rhyme it for us)

Coffee grows on every bush
Which everyone can have for free.
And corn grows there—really lush.
An ear can weigh a pound or three.

This particular scene ends with a soliloquy—like a face-to-camera interview, with Ludwig Acker, another member of this prerevolutionary conspiracy, reciting to us all the things that he will do with the money. For Acker, the height of luxury would entail a separate plate for each course of the meal and a different shaped glass for every type of wine. "And all the people will see me and say, there sits a wealthy man. They'll be friendly and bow for me." It is not really wealth that he wants: he seeks through wealth some social respect.

Intercut with these scenes of play and hope are scenes around the dinner table where we see that as a group the peasants all eat their meals from a single shared bowl. The men have little sense of how to organize themselves; and the women, for the most part, are locked in superstitious mutterings about the *status quo.* "The one who shouldn't steal won't steal," as one of them says. "The one who has nothing, rightly has nothing." The poor people are trapped by their limited perspective.

It is no wonder. All the village folklore conspires to keep them ignorant, to present their condition as natural and unalterable. After the robbery, when Heinrich now has the six hundred guilders necessary for him to marry, a young flower-girl reads (face direct-to-camera) a wedding text which recommends that these people accept their condition. During the same scene, in what seems like a parody of the sentimental *Heimat*

film, Briel the peddler, at ease now with life and confident that he has outwitted the system, delivers an improvised panegyric about the beauty of the world that has everything in it that one needs—"like a house, like a fairy-tale."

Act One (as we might call it) of *Der Pltötzliche Reichtum der Armen Leute von Kombach* ends with the sixth and this time successful attempt to hold up the stage coach. This sequence recapitulates the beginning. Only now are we able confidently to situate the opening sequence within the time span created by the film, anchoring its position in the narrative and preparing us thus for success. As the poor people don't wish to hurt anyone, they strive to avoid violence—a kindness that later counts against them as it helps to disclose them as inhabitants of the district. The excitement at their victory is viscerally created by a hand-held camera that swirls about both as participant and observer in the action, as if part of the wide-eyed delight the poor people experience at their success. And if, throughout the first part of the film, they have worked collectively to bring off the robbery to the extent that we scarcely know them individually by name, once their separate piles of money are counted out around the table, each man being named as he receives his portion, they increasingly begin to be isolated from one another. They go their separate ways until, one by one, they are found out, coaxed into confession and into betraying their former collaborations.

Although the recent success at Cannes of *The Tin Drum* may help to change this,[4] not too much has been written about Volker Schlöndorff. His work is far less talked about than that of his more fashionable compatriots. It is arguable, however, that in the ten films he has made since *Der Junge Törless* in 1965, he has displayed a more direct political conscience than either Werner Herzog or Rainer Werner Fassbinder. This may be partly the result of his Parisian education and of his apprenticeship with Louis Malle and Alain Resnais.[5] Certainly his politics have been influenced by his collaboration with his wife, Margarethe von Trotta. She acts in his films, sometimes co-directs them, and has just recently directed a film on her own. In 1972, by making *Strohfeuer* together (literally "Strawfire" or "Flash in the Pan" but called in English *A Free Woman*), they tried directly to deal with the enslavement of women—as they also did in 1975 with the adaptation of Heinrich Böll's *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum.*

While not as innovative as Fassbinder, Herzog, or Wenders, Schlöndorff's films have a toughness and a simplicity that deserve to be recognized. Also, unlike the work of many of his colleagues, his films are completely devoid of any sense of camp or of an uneasy love affair with American civilization. Schlöndorff perceives social injustices and sets out to expose them; but after his *Michael Kohlhass* film in 1968, he has taken pains to avoid the trap of simplistic realism.[6] He has learned a lot from Berthold Brecht—lessons which must have been fresh in his mind at the time of filming *Kombach* because, with Fassbinder as an actor, Schlöndorff had filmed *Baal* for German television the previous year.

While the visual surface of *Kombach* is scrupulously historical and persuasively authentic, Schlöndorff contests this authenticity by the excitement of his camerawork and by his use of music. If throughout the film the visual track is meticulously of its period, the music track prepared by Klaus Doldinger at times contains echoes from The Pink Floyd, The Who, and even from "Tommy,"[7] suggesting in this way that the problems of exploitation are not confined to Germany or to the nineteenth century.

The second half of this film is organized quite differently from the first half. While there are still moments of great compassion, there is none of the excitement that characterized the first half. There is one moment, for example, when we see Ludwig Acker, now with a horse and a servant, walking into town as he told us he would. We see him rehearsing his lines for his posh hotel: "I'm a rich man on a journey. Bring me food and drink—only the best." But when he gets to the hotel, it too is impoverished and can offer only soup and bread and gin.

The poor people of Kombach are done in by their simplicity and by their honesty. They lack the sophistication necessary to cover up for one another and to find alibis that will resist the trickeries of the court. As Marcel Martin has put it: "All Schlöndorff's protagonists are misfits, but of course the director justifies their refusal to adjust themselves to an intolerable order or to an

established disorder."[8] The officials from Giessen, on the other hand, have mastered the skills of persuading the poor people to betray one another and they have the verbal dexterity to confuse the defendants once they are on trial.

As one by one they are rounded up, their religious preconditioning prompts them to confess their sins and so absolve themselves before God. Only Heinrich Geiz resists this submission—until the last minute. His passionate body-needs, his strong feelings and quick temper make us feel that he is struggling towards that independence of thought necessary for a revolutionary consciousness. At the moment of sentencing, for example, Heinrich defies convention and attacks the judge, knocking off his wig. In the context of the film, this is a symbolic political act.

Those who are not sentenced either shoot or hang themselves. Only the Jew escapes. In a marvellous scene involving basically a stationary camera set-up, Briel walks towards us through the mist, from extreme long-shot to medium close-up, at which point the camera moves along with him left for a moment until he leaves the frame. Throughout this scene, with a voice track not matched to the space of the frame, Briel offers us a disquisition on the peasants who could not escape because they were afraid to leave the land. A farmer "fears what he doesn't know," Briel explains. Then, as he moves into the medium close-up position, he begins a recitation of all the places that he alone will get to see—Los Angeles, San Francisco, Arkansas, Kansas, Alabama, New York—another curious moment in the film because half the names he mentions didn't fully exist in 1822.[9]

The execution of the Geiz family and of Ludwig Acker is a masterpiece of aesthetic restraint and of metonomic displacement. With its strong thrust to the right, the opening sequence of this film had linked these people in the shared activity of the robbery but it also divided them by zip-pans and jump-cuts. The penultimate scene, however, in which they are sentenced to death by decapitation, links them more securely by a continuous camera movement. As each name is called out, the camera registers a stick being broken and cast down and then moves on to the right to register a pair of clasped hands before moving on to register another stick being broken and then to yet another pair of clasped hands, as they hold on to one another while listening to the sentence. In the last scene, the camera follows the four of them as they are led away to the place of execution. Meanwhile, the narrator's voice, leaping ahead in time, describes for us the way in which each individual died. Then, up to the sky and cut to the final title, emphasizing the irony within which these people lived and because of which they died.

Was an dir Berg war
Haben sie geschleift,
Und dein Tal
Schüttete man zu.
Über dich führt
Ein bequemer Weg.

This is untranslated in any print of the film I have seen; one meaning might be: "What in you was a mountain they have ploughed under and your valley has been filled in. Above you runs a comfortable path."

Der Plötzliche Reichtum der Armen Leute von Kombach tells the story, with compassion and insight, of a handful of people who survived the age of Martin Luther but did not live long enough to be energized by the age of Karl Marx. In its quiet way, it is an extraordinary film. It deserves to be better known. —PETER HARCOURT

NOTES

1. "La Soudaine Richesse des Pauvres de Kombach" by Mireille Amiel. *Cinéma '72* (Paris), Jan. 1972, pp. 136-137.
2. "Entretien," by Jean-Loup Passek. *Ibid.*, pp. 138-141. At one point in this interview, Schlöndorff says that he was particularly keen to investigate why there had been no uprising in Germany after the French revolution of 1789.
3. "The situation in which they are struggling seems natural to them, ordained by God and by the law." Schlöndorff, in *ibid.*
4. For biofilmography, see *l'Avant-Scène* 181 (Paris), Feb '77.
5. See *Die Blechtrommel: Tagebuch einer Verfilmung*, by Volker Schlöndorff (Darmstadt, Sammlung Luchterland, 1979), for Schlöndorff's diary while filming *The Tin Drum*.
6. From "Entretien" with Jean-Loup Passek.
7. Musical references identified for me by rock authority Robert Bowman, York University, 1977.
8. Marcel Martin, in *Écran '73* (Paris), No. 12, Feb '73, pp. 68-69.
9. As Briel initiated the robbery and is the only one to escape, Schlöndorff has been attacked for antisemitism—an absurd accusation as Schlöndorff himself has explained since, first of all, the Jewish peddler is present in the court records, and secondly, it is the wandering peddler, be he Jewish or not, who has the mobility to be able to get away—perhaps to become one of the founding members of Hollywood!

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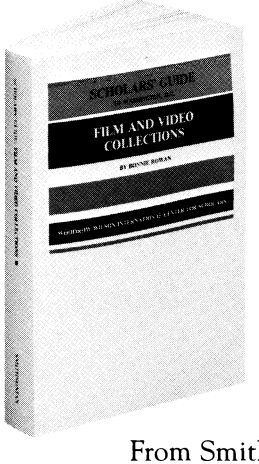

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